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YEATS'S VERSIONS OF LITERARY HISTORY,
1896-1903

by

Ben Hawes

A thesis submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements of the degree of Ph.D. in the Faculty of Arts, Department of English, September 1998.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the critical prose written by William Butler Yeats in the period 1896-1903, and identifies the evolution within it of a mode of literary history. I concentrate on *Ideas of Good and Evil*, and on the selected edition *Poems of Spenser*.

The introduction examines notions of golden ages and of original fracture, and the insertion of these tropes into a variety of literary histories. I consider some of the aims and problems of literary history as a genre, and the peculiar solutions offered by Yeats's approaches. I give particular attention to Yeats's alternation between two views of poetry: as evading time, and as forming the significant history of nations.

The first chapter examines those essays in *Ideas of Good and Evil* written earliest. I consider the essays on Blake first, because Blake was the most significant influence on the writing of Yeats's idiosyncratic literary histories. I proceed to the essays on Shelley, on a new age of imaginative community, and on magic. The second chapter demonstrates how Yeats's ideals and ideas became modified in more practical considerations of audience, poetic rhythm and theatrical convention, and I identify the new kinds of literary history in the essays on Morris and Shakespeare, which are concerned with fracture, limitation and the loss of unmediated access to timeless imaginative resources.

The third chapter briefly examines Yeats's very early imitations of Edmund Spenser, and then considers the uses of literary history in Yeats's edition of Spenser. The final chapter identifies Yeats's later returns to Spenser, and shows how the earlier modes of literary history governed subsequent adaptations.

My conclusion summarises the advantages and limitations of Yeatsian literary history, and place my study into the context of Yeats's whole career, comparing these literary histories with *A Vision*.

Dedicated to my mother and to the memory of my father

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Declaration

This thesis represents my own unassisted work, and no part of it has been submitted previously for any academic qualification. The views expressed are my own and not those of the University of Bristol.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ben Hawes', with a stylized, cursive script.

Ben Hawes

YEATS'S VERSIONS OF LITERARY HISTORY, 1896-1903

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Introduction: Yeats's Versions of Literary History 1896-1903

In this study I am primarily concerned with the ways in which W. B. Yeats interpreted and arranged some of his literary predecessors in his critical prose within a relatively short period of his career. These critical writings articulate notions of what constitutes tradition in literature, and of what the relations are between literature, literary development, traditions and communities. This study concentrates on two books: *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1903) and *Poems of Spenser* (1906). The former is a collection of essays, generally on aspects of literature; the latter is an introduction to and a selection from a poetic predecessor who had been one of Yeats's earliest influences, and from whose work Yeats would continue to make selective adaptations throughout his career. In my final chapter, I examine the poetic adaptations and prose citations of Spenser in Yeats's later career, to consider how they continue and modify the reading of and selection from Spenser presented in this earlier period: that chapter demonstrates some of the poetic implications of Yeats's prose constructions of literary history. I do not claim that every single echo, allusion, borrowing or adaptation in Yeats's oeuvre necessarily carries with it an assumption of a sustained concept of a literary history, but articulations of literary history provided analyses and justifications of many responses to those models. I restrict the rest of my attention to this early period, because within this period Yeats discovered modes of literary history which greatly enabled his later work.

These critical writings attach a range of implications to literary criticism, and they do so through a set of principles and practices which constitute a mode of literary history and of cultural criticism. Any theory of literary influence is also a theory of literary history; a study of particular literary influences will involve or at least encounter more and less explicit notions of literary history. In this thesis I will examine Yeats's own idiosyncratic formations of literary histories. In these writings Yeats pronounces on the qualities in the work of poetic predecessors which may relate them to each other, which offer continuing interest into the time of writing and which offer or have offered opportunities and examples to successors, and more and less explicitly, to himself. His analyses are not stable or consistent, since they suggest various potentials for literature in the present and future, and invite acceptance by different forms of reading community. Yeats frequently associates poets with prophets, and these critical writings have more and less specific

implications for literature, community and the interdependence of literature and community to come. More than most criticism, they offer oppositional precepts and launch enterprises. The interactions between poetics and national and social histories present versions of what forms community, of what kind of poetry may seem to have persistent value, and of what forms an audience in and across periods. The accounts of conditions of community, imaginative and social, as vulnerable to historical changes deny any automatic assumption of unmediated inheritance of traditions. His histories abound with cycles, parts of cycles, renaissances and fractures, with various implications for poets, for communities, and for the relations of poets to communities.

Yeats's critical formulations privilege reading, writing and performing poetry above other activities, above particular political considerations for instance, while actually reassessing the terms of cultural and political discussion. In these two books Yeats considers different authors and modes of writing and performance in relation to the imaginative communities which generate them, which they may generate, and which may be defined by imaginative participation. Within this set of priorities, the history of a nation may be the history of the continuation or of the diminution of its imaginative possessions. For Yeats, versions of history, and in particular versions of the history of imaginative creations, always imply versions of community, in the present but also with past and future. In this circular process of analysis, communities are held together by imaginative possessions, and some kinds of community generate modes of creativity. One major recurrent example of this is that by imagining the development of English culture in terms of the collapse of certain kinds of imaginative community, Yeats could claim for Ireland and for the Irish a greater affinity to some English poets of the past than was available to the English in the present.

In these formulations, poetry comes to have a very complex relation to time, and an innately privileged relation to history: not only the capacity to transcend limitation within one era, but also a capacity to delineate significant history, to perceive and to describe patterns in the history of imaginative community. Because his chosen poets are also credited with making analogous versions of history, poetry becomes significant history. For instance, Yeats sees in Shakespeare's history plays a dramatisation of a very Yeatsian opposition of two

principles, both characteristic of Shakespeare's age and perpetual, and he praises Shakespeare's achievement of a partial transcendence of history through the use of it as the material for art. Ultimately history comes to be about poetry, because other analyses, details and discourses are examined through their relation to communal or individual imaginations. I note the inclusiveness and the occasionally frustrating vagueness of Yeats's invocations of "imagination", but I also aim to explore the range of uses to which these invocations are put.

In this introduction I will explain my approaches to Yeats's uses of literary histories and identify some of the repeated tropes of those histories, their variety and their functions. I will also identify some relevant factors in Yeats's career within this period. I will start by clarifying and classifying some aspects of Yeats's uses of literary history. David Perkins's survey of literary history, and of its aims and its inadequacies, provides some useful analyses.¹ Perkins describes the prominence of literary history as a discipline in the first seventy-five years of the nineteenth century, and its major characteristics:

All of the most important literary histories in the nineteenth century were narratives, and they traced the phases or sometimes the birth and/or death of a suprapersonal entity. This entity might be a genre, such as poetry; the "spirit" of an age, such as classicism or romanticism; or the character or "mind" of a race, region, people, or nation as reflected in its literature. [...] The assumption that the various genres, periods, schools, traditions, movements, communicative systems, discourses, and epistemes are not baseless and arbitrary groupings, that such classifications can have objective and valid grounds in the literature of the past, is still the fundamental assumption of the discipline, the premise that empowers it. [...] With the unfolding of an idea, principle, suprapersonal entity, or *Geist* as its subject, a literary history became teleological. It acquired a plot, could assume a point of view, and might generate considerable narrative interest.²

Yeats's early career coincided with a decline in confidence in such literary history. I suggest that he both questioned and adapted some of these principal characteristics of the genre. In the uses of literary history which I will examine, Yeats combines different suprapersonal entities, and his negotiation between different ones, his models of them and his stylistic formulations of what constitutes them, are central to my study. One suprapersonal entity described in these writings

¹ David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

² *ibid.*, pp.2-5.

is an immanent resource of symbols, the extent of access to which has changed in certain patterns through history. Literary history becomes a matter of perceiving a potential access which is realised to varying degrees in different eras and communities, and in different individuals. Race, region, people and nation feature, but for Yeats the constitution of these is actually dependent on their imaginative conditions. He considers suprapersonal entities in terms of the discourses and imaginative possessions which they hold in common. Imagination is encoded in his versions of community, and it becomes the decisive factor in choices about appropriate use of contextual historical detail. In some formulations of literary periods, the *Geist* may be antipathetic to the formation of the kind of imaginative community producing imaginative creativity. The consistency of suprapersonal entities becomes Yeats's subject. His arrangement of characteristics national and supranational is most crucial in the essays on the past, present and future of imaginative creativity in Ireland. Yeats follows the pattern of most national cultural movements in emphasising continuity of characteristics: this can be a continuity of experience of oppression, or a continuity in spite of oppression. However, while he stresses unbroken imaginative traditions in Ireland, he also recurrently raises the spectre of discontinuity, and builds ruptures and potential ruptures into his histories, often as ways of assessing and explaining literary quality.

I will describe the functions of Yeats's idiosyncratic terms and priorities in recasting arguments in cultural politics, but I will also show that at the same time Yeatsian literary history is overtly concerned with the manipulation and adaptation of influences. Responses to past and contemporary politics and to poetic tradition are articulated within a mode of historical understanding, however eccentric it may become at times, and Yeats's readings of poetic predecessors experiment with more than justifications for his poetic adaptations: selections of traditions and formulations of what is meant by tradition are implied as well in assessments which attach a religious sense to those imaginative creations which he recognises as having persisted through time.

Yeats's analyses are polemical and frequently revisionist: he perceives some associations between authors across historical periods and prefers these often idiosyncratic groupings to more conventional schools. In his treatments of successiveness and repetition he often complicates and refutes developmental

analysis even as he employs it. His attention to genre as a criterion of classification is inconsistent. He describes movements, but his analyses of them are complicated by their tendency to merge into descriptions of perpetual qualities apparent through history, and his arrangement of such perpetual qualities into perpetual oppositions. His writing interrupts models of steady progression through time, to attach value to transhistorical qualities and indeed those which he claims escape time altogether. Perkins cites other examples of a similar pattern, for instance in literary histories which set romantic and classical into an opposition, between which literary production has swung back and forth.³ I note Yeats's gradual movement towards cyclical histories, and the recurrent possibility that movement back and forth between principles can easily become cyclical. However, I am particularly concerned with Yeats's literary histories in this period because their patterns are not fixed, they are exploratory and concerned with potential.

In a letter to Thomas MacDonagh Yeats offered a relatively simple program for imitation:

I strongly advise you not to publish for the present but (1st) to read the great old masters of English, Spenser, Ben Jonson, Sir Thomas Brown, perhaps Chaucer - until you have got our feebleness modern English out of your head - When we read old writers we imitate nothing but their virtues - for their faults, which were of their time & not of ours have no charm for us - If we read modern writers we are likely to imitate their faults for we share their illusions.⁴

In his own literary histories and adaptations, he makes the detection of faults which restrict work to the concerns of its time into a critical practice, a means of social commentary and a way of expounding spiritual histories. In part, Yeats's attribution of a capacity to certain authors and works to reach out of their time into an immanent resource is one solution to another problem which Perkins notes "in critics touched by fin de siècle aestheticism": the problem that historical contextualism fails to account for "the qualitative difference between works of art produced in exactly the same time and place."⁵ For Yeats, high literary quality is defined by a relation to time and to the perception of patterns within it, but also to transcendence of it. Great poetry, particularly that incorporating symbolism, is described as revelatory rather than representative of its time: this offers an escape

³ *ibid.*, pp.156-7.

⁴ *Letters III*, pp.246-7, 9th November 1902.

from the implication, and the inadequacy of the implication, that literature is the sum of its contextual ingredients. Yeats's claim that poets can perceive both the immanent imaginative resource and the changing patterns of access to it also implies that poetry is a literary history, and this reading of literary histories within poetry provides further idiosyncratic solutions. An increasingly important issue for Yeats in this period is that the poet's ability to perceive a general failure of imaginative access to a source may still generate poetry, may generate a gain from the formulation of a perception of loss. So, in Yeats's readings, poetry's relation to a context of historical communities and to time itself on local and cosmic levels does account for literary quality.

Yeats's literary histories rely on their rhetorical strategies. Hayden White has investigated the implications of rhetorical structures for the production of meaning from history, and has suggested that

the value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can be only imaginary. The notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of the stories we tell about imaginary events could only have its origin in wishes, daydreams, reveries. [...] Is the fiction of [...] a world, capable of speaking itself as a form of a story, necessary for the establishment of that moral authority without which the notion of a specifically social reality would be unthinkable?⁶

Literary history, in any mode, is history with peculiar intentions because of the inevitable interaction between formal attributes in the writing of it and the formal attributes which it traces and to the history of which it attributes narratives. Yeats's literary histories are the histories of the creation of works of imagination, works which create coherent experiences whether from imaginary or from real events, and in which formal attributes realise the potential of "wishes, daydreams, reveries." But the literary histories in which he places these works also seek to use such formal attributes without apology.

Imaginative creations are significant history for Yeats, marking and creating the establishment of an authority and through it an imaginative community "without which the notion of a specifically social reality would be unthinkable".

⁵ *ibid.*, pp.7.

⁶ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp.24-5.

However, the value of imaginative creations for Yeats is not in their creation of coherence in the representation of the experience of living in time in the past - they are not in that mode of representative history - but in their capacity to suspend or to transcend time. His literary histories seek to explain the creation within time of works which evade it. As a result, they have a complex relation to narrative, using it but interrupting it, cutting across it. Yeats makes much of the rearrangement or suspension of time made possible in aesthetic experience, and also makes these ideal qualities in his subjects. These literary histories suggest implicitly that different artistic modes have different relations to time, and he continually seeks through selection and quotation of poetry, through stylistic strategies in prose, and through the use of literary or dramatic terms, analogies and structures in the writing of history to create a mode of criticism to take account of those preoccupations. His detection of patterns in history is analogous to and supportive of rhetorical structuring. In his literary histories, eras can attain the structure of tragedies, and this structure is then employed to explain the changes in literary production within those eras. His history traces the variations of a communal mythopoeic capacity; its primary materials are imaginative creations, and it proceeds by selecting events and contexts which can be arranged to reproduce the formal strategies of sections of narrative, elegy, verbal tableau vivant, drama and visionary revelation, to explain the instances when imaginative experience has allowed a breaking out of time into art. His histories are formed through alternations: he claims that in some periods life achieved the temporal qualities of tableau, vision or drama, while in others it fell back into mere narrative, into being driven by time. The forms of art determine Yeats's terms in many ways. While constructing a concept of an era, his terms often describe things which might normally be seen as contextual to the production of art in terms of artistic creation or performance. Historical figures are considered as performers, major or lesser actors in tragic dramas. Writers may be both performers and audiences, peculiarly able to perceive the dramas of significant history.

I will examine the structures, from volume of essays down to sentences, quotations and adaptations through which Yeats performs literary history, and I suggest that they are crucial to the functions of those histories. Relations to time and to histories even on a verbal level are strategies within Yeats's formulation of

his aesthetics, not incidental to them. His literary-historical style does not always involve a highly sophisticated theoretical involvement between history and art: it also introduces patterns into his histories as if they were conventional, when they are rhetorically persuasive: for instance “Is not all history but the coming of that conscious art which first makes articulate and then destroys the old wild energy?” (*Poems of Spenser* p.xxxiii; *Essays and Introductions* pp.372-3).⁷ I will consider the uses of rhetoric by which Yeats suggests a consensus about the shapes of cultural history which he is actually endeavouring to create.

Yeats is obviously not exceptional in attributing to art a peculiar evasion of time. A continuation of valuations through time is undoubtedly one of our reasons for interest in many literary works: among other issues, we are fascinated by what has continued to be fascinating, and seek to know why some works have so continued and some have not. Among the frustrating fascinations of writing literary history are surely the consciousness that literary history itself rarely persists in a similar way, and the knowledge that longstanding valuations of some works offer no guarantees holding on the future. It may be argued that to persist is not to transcend, but the aesthetic experience prompted by an artwork of the past can at least offer the possibility of community of experience with original or intervening audiences, and so also suggest that these experiences are outside mundane temporality. In one particular complex many poets, and particularly Romantic poets, have claimed community with poets in original states of human society, states with a different sense of time: Yeats’s attempts to historicise the evasion of time will recur as motifs in this study.

Many artistic modes offer aesthetic experiences which are themselves in part new experiences of time: whether in meditative stasis, or in satisfactions of anticipation or in the postponement of it. The poetic tradition of meditation on visual art-objects is intensely involved with the examination of such experience through repetition and adaptation. Poetry and music can in any case generally claim particular accommodations with time in that they employ time in rhythms and in repetitions. Yeats repeatedly picks out these implied relations between art and time

⁷ I give page references in parentheses to *Essays and Introductions* after those to *Poems of Spenser* and to *Ideas of Good and Evil*.

to employ them, often with a surprising literalness, in presenting aesthetics and literary histories.

The peculiar relation of art to time may be problematic for literary history, and this problem has been evident at least since the late nineteenth century. René Wellek stated that

The main argument for the abandonment of literary history comes from those who deny the pastness of literature. As early as 1883 W. P. Ker, later an eminent historian, stated that a work of literature is not a link in a chain and is above the world of movement.⁸

Among Yeats's principal influences for writing histories of art and of literature, Walter Pater's writings are particularly informed by a concern with the presentness of art and its relation to other modes of history. However, in claiming that art is the ultimately significant history Yeats goes further than most in rearranging the relations between art and history. He attributes to art a revelation of eternal realities. He also advances the claims of his own literary history by claiming that art gives us histories of imaginative development and change: literature may be its own literary history, and his literary history claims to detect the literary history within imaginative creations as well as of them. Allowing art many of the attributes of religious doctrine, practice and belief, Yeats defines art's evasion of time as revelatory, and through this allows aesthetic experience to comprehend and to be analogous to visionary experience. He permits himself inconsistencies: art may be "above the world of movement", but it may also be seen as breaking out of that movement, across it "withershins", in his later appropriately supernatural term, or it may ritualise or dramatise movement.

I am particularly concerned with Yeats's analyses of writers as more and less out of phase in their era. Perkins shows through his study that the choice of appropriate context when writing literary history is problematic. Context tends to be chosen because it relates to an author or to authors at the focus of a study, but this kind of context will inevitably provide only a skewed version of the historical period. Yeats schematises this, making the relation of the author to the era into an

⁸ René Wellek, "The Fall of Literary History", in *The Attack on Literature and Other Essays* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), pp.64-77, p.66. W. P. Ker, "Philosophy of Art," in *Essays in Philosophical Criticism* (1883), reprinted in *Collected Essays* (London, 1925), 2:234-271: "above the world of movement", p.251. Interestingly Ker's essay begins by discussing Plato and establishing an original separation between poetry and science, and moves through a very

explanation of an oeuvre. Any contextual history of literature also assumes some kind of relation between literature and society. Yeats reinserts this into the poetry itself, in that imaginative possessions and community have a dialectical relationship, each determining the other. He extends this to locate places and periods in which life and imagination are not only linked, they may be more or less equivalent. Yeats finds in Blake a commendation of the belief that “even love and death and old age are an imaginative art” (p.201; p.130); he observes of Spenser’s era that “an art was being created for the last time in England which had half its beauty from continually suggesting a life hardly less beautiful than itself” (p.xxii; pp.363-4). Yeats measures the relations between art and its contexts to produce histories of division and rapprochement. In describing these relations between “life” and art, he effectively makes the problem of consistency in writing literary history into the matter of literary history.

This thesis is also a study of influence and of its place in literary history. Perhaps the strongest temptation for the critic studying poetic influence is the imposition of a schematic interpretation onto any relatively diverse group of instances. The examination of scattered borrowings, which might demand a variety of definitions from the sustained encounter with a model to the possible functions of incidental rhythmic requirements and the operations of a lively auditory memory, will tend to be badly served by an insistence that every case must fit into a discernible pattern. One function of any assumption that conflict and anxiety are immanent conditions in poetic influence and inheritance is the occlusion of the often peculiar characteristics and characterisations of the conflicts which do occur. Although I recognise some elements of a Bloomian anxiety of influence in Yeats's formulations, those formulations often enter into very specific arguments and serve several purposes. Indeed I find Bloom’s own formulations more apt as analogies to Yeats’s than as explications of them: Bloom shares with Yeats a determination to choose his own terms even at the risk of obscurity and absurdity, and a preoccupation with enlisting disestablished and arcane religious doctrines and terms.⁹ The imposition of schemes can automatically translate a poet’s own

wide range of examples. His attribution to art of an independent mode of development after this original separation anticipates some of Yeats’s formulations.

⁹ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: a Theory of Poetry* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); *Poetry and Repression* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

articulations of traditions into accepted critical terms, tending to abstraction, rather than examining them in all of their manifestations and considering why these articulations have taken these forms. Yeats's formulations and syntheses produce complex, circular and interdependent structures. Without losing a primary concern with poetry, he theorised the connections between poetry, history, contemporary politics, tradition and the suprapersonal entity which may be a nation or his own readership.

I examine the syntheses which feed into Yeats's critical mode in this period, but I will also demonstrate that the diversity of the formulations produced by this mode must question whether Yeats's ideas of tradition or of inheritance were ever stable. In *Ideas of Good and Evil* in particular, Yeats's formulations can revise and destabilise as many traditions as they establish. In my first chapter I examine Yeats's uses of affirmatively heterodox poses, and suggest that his formation of literary histories constitutes a recurrent practice - initiated in this period - rather than a position or a pantheon. Through the rest of his career the formulations and the implications of those formulations change, but the mode of forming them persists. My examination of the details of Yeats's accounts of cultural history and poetic inheritance registers Yeats's own uses of system and his progress towards systems, but considers them as responses to competing needs and complex contexts. I have attempted to avoid applying Yeats's later systematic terms to his earlier writing, and seeing earlier arrangements of history solely as proto-*Visions*. This may result in an emphasis on inconsistency, but that risk seems justified because it allows a full attention to some specific constructs as treatments of particular predecessors; more generally and perhaps more importantly it resists the simplification of the varieties of versions of history and the many modes of imagining time and times which drove and which display Yeats's poetic, critical and philosophical development. In my conclusion I return to the issue of historical system in Yeats's aesthetics across his career.

Ideas of Good and Evil presents many aspects to an examination of poetic influence: within it Yeats presents more and less specific and antagonistic critiques of Blake, Shelley, Shakespeare, Morris and more recent, contemporary and even anticipated writing. Yeats perpetually constructed literary histories in which to insert his models, but frequently a part of this process is the attribution of a mode

of history to those models, a mode with which he then makes some accommodation. In the cases of Blake, Shelley and Shakespeare, Yeats allows his predecessors a kind of freedom from entrapment in the past according to the extent to which they developed their own senses of history and their access to a notion of eternity. Spenser is accorded only a more partial approval than these: in Yeats's introduction to his *Poems of Spenser*, Spenser's oeuvre is divided into those parts which were dominated by the cultural developments of their time and those which perceived and registered those developments while remaining independent of them. Yeats resists some aspects of Spenser's own constructions of history, and selects from and adapts others.

As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, Yeats resorts frequently to the concept of the "great memory" in his discussions of traditions. This functions as a transhistorical source, characterised by a lack of hierarchy, an openness to further application, invocation and association: as it dissolves time, it may also dissolve structure and priority. It potentially allows a place to unschematic transference, miracle and accident in imaginative traditions. Although it forms a kind of ultimate order in many of his presentations of cultural tradition, it is highly inclusive and, of its nature, is operative across, and regardless of, passages of time. Yeats's tendency to present such traditions as ruled by occult patterns does have hierarchical and hieratic connotations, but it seems equally important to him to ensure that they evade limitation by dogmatism and predictability, that they allow, in fact, selection and synthesis of a wide range of material. The great memory retains symbols and some elements of narrative, but appears to dissolve genre and any clear kind of succession.

In some of Yeats's early prose, this common source of images and tales is cited with reference to folklore, and demonstrates Yeats's personal adaptations of his readings in nineteenth-century folklorists as well as his own efforts in that area. Early in his career he declared that this immanent source manifests at least a potential community between folklore and written poetry:

When such tales are well understood; when the secret of their immortality is mastered; when writers have begun to draw on them as copiously as did Homer, and Dante, and Shakespeare, and Spenser, then will the rhetorician begin to wither and the romance maker awake

from a sleep as of a grey flagstone, and shake off the ice and snow and weave immortal woofs again.¹⁰

In his writings around the turn of the century Yeats tends to stress the persistence of images and symbols in particular, and is only intermittently optimistic about this reawakening. His symbolist aesthetic continues for some time to be characterised by moments of revelatory access to an eternal source, but this comes to be presented more as a matter of personal achievement than as a restitution of broader imaginative community. However, I will not overemphasise such a linear development, since these critical writings tend to oscillate between different levels of optimism about audiences. I discuss this in greater detail in my second chapter, which also touches on Yeats's insistent considerations of community, considerations that may suggest an underlying anxiety that the great memory may in fact be only Yeats's own memory, that the potential transhistorical community which he posits may remain only a potential imagined within poetic works.

In Yeats's literary histories poets and their historical periods are gauged by the extent to which they can gain access to this transhistorical source. Although always potentially transhistorical and unifying, the Great Memory functions in Yeats's critical writing as a means of measuring the imaginative capacities and unities of cultures, and these measures of difference become increasingly sophisticated. Versions of literary history and linear development within traditions, personal, national and international, are recurrently modified by a selective process which considers past oeuvres in terms of their access to eternity, both in terms of access to sources and of the persisting value and interest of the oeuvres.

Yeats's insertion of original divisions into cultural histories takes diverse forms. The now-fractured, once-unified elements may be social, they can be poetry and music, poetry and religion, magic and religion, religion and folklore; they can suggest a condition of language in which abstraction was impossible, and which has no distinction between poetic artifice and common speech and imagery. They can adapt a principally poetic model of unity between people and nature, characterised by the sanctity of place, and a condition in which there was little distinction between natural and supernatural vision. As well as looking to

¹⁰ *Uncollected Prose* I 1886-1896, ed. by John P. Frayne (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp.326-8, p.328. This article, "The Evangel of Folk-Lore", is a review of William Larminie's *West Irish Folk Tales*, and appeared in the *Bookman*, June 1894.

folklorists, to writers on comparative religion and on Celticism, he drew for versions of original states and their collapse on literary sources in Blake, Shelley, Morris, Arnold, Pater, Renan and Standish James O'Grady, and more generally in pastoral and Romantic notions of original societies. Imaginative synthesis is both a quality of Yeats's lost ideal states and a principle for forming characterisations of them. In my title I have referred to "Yeats's Versions of Literary History", but I will show that even that expression may obscure one of the crucial kinds of division which Yeats perceives in his critical writings: the division between oral and literary cultures. For Yeats, that is also a difference between modes of community and modes of imaginative transference. The association between literature and folklore within the great memory comprises ambiguities characteristic to these formulations. The great memory may dissolve that distinction between written and oral cultures, but usually only potentially, since, Yeats suggests, writers need to achieve a restitution to what came effortlessly to oral cultures. There is also the recurrent question of whether the restitution can be reached through efforts of will and technique, or if it is produced by impersonal historical cycle. In the model of the original state, individuals and individual creativity are subsumed into a collectivity; in the later periods writers are individualised exceptions. The potential transhistorical and sometimes international imaginative communion can also be manipulated to make claims for local and national qualities. Yeats attaches a value to certain places where he perceives an access to an order of international, transhistorical symbols. Repetition of symbolism guarantees the value of one place, but that repetition is also guaranteed by its coherence with wider human experience. Yeats modifies his formulations to recast and to negotiate through arguments about cultural nationalism and its potential restrictions, but does not always admit his ambiguities. However, he does manipulate those ambiguities in literary histories. He reads Spenser's readings of places, and deplores his failure to find images in Ireland for anything except political purposes, and this analysis is presented through analogy with Greek and Latin poetry and poets, and poetic mythologies.

Detailed readings of these critical essays discourage excessive schematisation, largely because of the profusion of schemes and notions of interacting traditions which Yeats manipulates. Like the strong rhetorical gestures,

fragments of system often lend only a very local assurance to a formulation, and notions of unity, whether of culture or of analytical system, may equally prove to be assertions, ideals and theories rather than confident descriptions. Yeats frequently clarifies an antinomy in history or in a predecessor's work, but soon overlays it with another: his systems of literary history seem never entirely to have completed their development, except in that they allow successive borrowings or placings according to successive needs. This profusion should alert us to the liberating uses of interacting systems of history and of aesthetics as they can confer authority while allowing negotiation to a poet selecting from a range of influences. Like so many other aspects of his work, Yeats's schemes for arranging his literary predecessors seem always to be "in development", so much so that the phrase can become redundant, or at least hopelessly unspecific. However, I suggest that Yeats's perpetual creation of times and cycles in history is another form of that peculiar profusion of times and becomings and endings in his work, all the way down to the functions of poems within sequences and of sentences within essays, which constantly suggest movement between positions and perpetually resist stasis. Analyses of stages of Yeats's career are perhaps never local enough.

Examinations of the influence of any one poetic predecessor on Yeats's writing tend to be complicated from the outset by the problems of isolating one strain from the interplay of sources and traditions in his work. His own descriptions of the development of his synthetic traditions stress diversity and the need to construct an authority which could sanctify that diversity. As I will show, one influence is often interpreted to provide terms for the adaptation of another. The religious language of this passage from "Four Years: 1887-1891" is characteristic of the accretion of modes of language, each carrying a different sense of a mode of tradition, which he employed within his literary histories:

I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians. I wished for a world where I could discover this tradition perpetually.¹¹

¹¹ *Autobiographies*, pp.115-6.

Distinctions between modes of cultural practice, and particularly between the kinds of continuation and inheritance associated with those modes, are eroded by syntheses, syntheses which are themselves generated by the possibility of loss of belief. The religious terminology is not simply metaphorical, it draws in the connotations of religious tradition by considering literature as persisting in the same modes as religious beliefs. The word “fardel” suggests a burden to be borne, but also adds a recollection of Shakespeare. The tenses cast this position as a youthful one which might have been modified, but is not specifically modified, and states that critical opinions are religious ones. The movements between personal times stage the perpetual construction of a transhistorical body of artistic doctrine.

Yeats’s manipulations and selections of sources are often governed by his contextual readings of “their first expression”, and by the conditions of imaginative community which he considers as responsible for their being “passed on from generation to generation”: in post-lapsarian literary tradition, outside the condition of broad imaginative community, he rarely allows a simple relation between first and perpetual expression, although the principle of perpetuity is a poetic ideal. My last chapter examines the operations of Yeats’s adaptations of poetic images and particular verbal formulations, and demonstrates that this concern with prior expressions has results on a local verbal level: when adapting a Spenserian image or symbol, Yeats tends to take on and adapt a whole cluster of words from the original to produce his new formulation. This extends beyond any very overt alteration of the sense, and it may suggest a pursuit of continuity and community with the original, even in spite of necessary adaptation. In *Ideas of Good and Evil* Yeats frequently quotes Blake, but also takes on an aphoristic style which allows him to present further formulations with the energy and authority of his predecessor. I will suggest that Yeats’s adaptations are profoundly involved in his views of literary and imaginative history: in adapting images from poetic predecessors he rearranges the histories of the imagination comprehended in those images. In rearranging words he changes the verbal succession into a new aesthetic experience.

Any dissection of Yeats’s poetic career into phases imposes one mode of organisation, and one which is itself recurrently complicated by Yeats’s own analyses of his phasal development and his ceaseless generation of further analyses

of phases: autobiographical, literary, historical, cultural and lunar. The very proliferation of these phases demands close attention: rather than seeing them as obstacles to our own study of Yeats's adaptations of influences, we should examine their generation as a resource for poetic development and as a means for organising, responding to and negotiating influences. These phases are enabling myths, set in motion by some remarkable manipulations of techniques of imagining time and development in poetry and prose. It may be significant with regard to the connotations of Spenser for Yeats and to the pressures on the latter's development at the beginning of the century that one of the most idiosyncratic and apparently chaotic instances of the imposition of novel phases of poetic history is in the introduction to *Poems of Spenser*. In a period when he was moving away from the dominance of Shelley's influence, was increasingly interested in the Renaissance, was developing new forms for confrontation and structural accommodation with time rather than escape from it in his poetry, and was particularly anxious to assert the independence of poetry to construct its own judgments of value, Yeats was given an opportunity to exercise these concerns in a re-consideration of one of his earliest influences.

Through the years around the turn of the century the apocalyptic stories, the troubled developments of *Where There is Nothing* and the unfinished novel *The Speckled Bird* all suggest that Yeats was attempting to find a form in which to explore individual spiritual or artistic quests, and in each case the quest also means a quest for a traditional but heterodox body of knowledge to follow. The paradox is significant: by testing heterodox and oppositional traditions Yeats questions what constitutes tradition, and what its relation to time may be. Frances Oppel considers Yeats's writings before and during his probable first readings of Nietzsche, in particular *Where There is Nothing*, in which the hero Paul Rutledge makes the Nietzschean declaration "We must get rid of everything that is not measureless eternal life".¹² However, there is no need to look to Nietzsche for Yeats's use of "eternal life" as an ultimate criterion: much of his writing in the previous few years describes and dramatises variants on this position. Eternity is recurrently and

¹² Frances Nesbitt Oppel, *Mask and Tragedy: Yeats and Nietzsche, 1902-1910* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1987), p.43. *The Variorum Edition of the Complete Plays of W. B. Yeats* ed. by Russell K. Alspach (London: Macmillan, 1966), p.1139.

insistently introduced as a criterion. Yeats's negotiations through traditions tend to historicise previous attempts to reach beyond temporal judgments, and his criticism and his poetic adaptations of poetic models are analogous to his dramatisations. To see the heroes of the play and of the apocalyptic stories only as self-images may be to ignore the advantages for Yeats of seeing many elements of traditions as attempts to pursue the eternal which were mitigated by the natures of their present times.

Yeats's own practice of magic was under severe stress at the beginning of the century. After the reformation which had removed Mathers from his leadership of the Golden Dawn in April 1900, Florence Farr and others had relaxed disciplines within the order to allow independent groups to pursue occult study with little regard for the established hierarchies and procedures. Yeats was deeply distressed by the threat to the order's stability, and found himself in an almost Swiftian position of desperate opposition to free-thinking. Beyond this immediate disturbance, though, lay the doubts which had arisen over the real origins of the rituals before and after Mathers's expulsion. The one structure which had seemed to offer Yeats a reliable spiritual resource, a heterodox and synthetic tradition and modes of spiritual progression, was seriously undermined. The disagreements over the groups led Yeats to print privately and circulate among his fellow students the essay "Is the Order of R.R. & A.C. to remain a Magical Order?", which insists on careful organisation for the preservation and dissemination of knowledge. Significantly, its claims to authority and true obedience to the order's traditions are made with hints of defensive defiance even as they appeal to community with the other members. This declaration of isolated adherence to tradition was to become a more familiar stance, yet the tradition in question was by common standards a heterodox one, and had only dubious claims to antiquity. The insistence through *Ideas of Good and Evil* that magic, vision and poetry are analogous and complementary modes of practice and experience is informed by an anxiety to establish a heterodox but sustaining mode of tradition. The volume also stresses the role of ritual in traditions: theatre, poetic rhythms, performance of poetry, visions, literary movements and even Yeats's notion of a transhistorical order of symbols are described in ritualistic terms. Ritual is analogous to the ordering of heterogeneous experience into persisting and shareable structures within poetry. In

my first two chapters I examine the connotations of ritual and of the occult which Yeats brings to literary history.

All of Yeats's ideas of tradition and inheritance were exercised in a number of specific areas at the beginning of the century, but in his writings, the merging of structures of thought from these different concerns is an absolute principle, though we should be suspicious of any assertion that this merging is an achievement of unity. In his criticism Yeats was overtly concerned with experimenting with versions of what might constitute traditions. Before I concentrate on the two volumes, I will comment briefly on some of Yeats's other contemporary prose. The announcements for the theatre and Yeats's successively modified projects for it approach these subjects with a more specific agenda for artistic autonomy and for the role of an elite group of practitioners than the other essays of the period. Among the other pieces the variety is initially bewildering. Practical dramatic criticism, including the part of the Shakespeare essay not reprinted in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, statements on Irish history and politics for the English and later the American newspapers and the continuation of Yeats's fascinating and self-defining aesthetic and political argument with John Eglinton and others are interspersed with a series of pieces on folklore and faeries and angry retorts to misrepresentations by newspapers. In "John Eglinton and Spiritual Art", Yeats uses Hallam's essay on Tennyson to characterise his own opposition to popular art which is imprisoned in replicating the ideas of its time.¹³ In opposition he offers an escape from such limitation within the spurious community of temporal concerns, by a characterisation of the spirit of the age:

I believe that the renewal of belief - which is the great movement of our time - will more and more liberate the arts from "their age" and from life, and leave them more and more free to lose themselves in beauty, and to busy themselves, like all the great poetry of the past and like religions of all times, with "old faiths, myths, dreams" - the accumulated beauty of the ages.¹⁴

Negotiations through conflicting ideas of time and life mark Yeats's succeeding attempts to select from "the accumulated beauty of the ages", to identify a means of analysing accumulation and stasis in the history of the arts. Hallam's essay and

¹³ A. H. Hallam, "Poems, Chiefly Lyrical [1830]" unsigned review, *Englishman's Magazine* (August 1831) i 616-28.

¹⁴ *Uncollected Prose* II 1897-1939 (London: Macmillan, 1975), ed. by Frayne and Johnson, pp.128-132, p.131. October 1898.

Browning's "Essay on Shelley" recur as sources of critical approaches, but in some careful manipulations as counters to political poetry and guides to characterising alternative ways for poetry to be responsive to its age.¹⁵ In "The Literary Movement in Ireland" nationalist poetry of the early nineteenth century is said to have failed because of popular rhythmic conventions and an aesthetic which sought spurious, passionless, social unity.¹⁶ Phases of cultural production are also phases of forms of community, and the uncollected prose can be all the more interesting as it is journalistic and argumentative: it employs journalism while confronting it as an instrument of deleterious cultural community. These pieces throw into relief some of the more sustained performances in *Ideas of Good and Evil*: however much they imagine eternal standards, they are ineluctably informed by insistently contemporary pressures. Charles O'Neill suggests that Yeats selected for the volume "only those works which, in manner as well as matter, announce a new age" but these other pieces are also informed by millennial and messianic preoccupations.¹⁷ The combination of criticism and messianism could produce some difficulties which are suggested but not fully examined in *Ideas of Good and Evil*. In "The Literary Movement in Ireland" Yeats confronts the possibility that the new age might not dawn, but justifies his critical writings by making claims for his prophecies as distinct from what they prophesy. For all the effort to unite different elements in anticipations of imaginative change, including literal and symbolic notions of time, the strain shows as this criticism scorns defeat by mere reality, or perhaps by the despotism of future fact:

Politics are, indeed, the forge in which nations are made, and the smith has been so long busy making Ireland according to His will that she may well have some important destiny. But whether this is so or not, whether this destiny is to make her in the arts, as she is in politics, a voice of the idealism of the common people, who still remember the dawn of the world, or to give her an unforeseen history, it can but express the accidents and energies of her past, and criticism does its natural work in trying to prophesy this expression; and, even if it is mistaken, a prophecy is not always made all untrue by being unfulfilled. A few years will decide if the writers of Ireland are to

¹⁵ Robert Browning, "Essay on Shelley", *Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley with an Introductory Essay by Robert Browning* (London: Edward Moxon, 1852).

¹⁶ *Uncollected Prose* II, p.184-196, p.185: December 1899.

¹⁷ Charles O'Neill, "The Essay as Aesthetic Ritual: W B Yeats and *Ideas of Good and Evil*" in *Essays on the Essay, Redefining the Genre* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1989), ed. by Alexander J Butrym, pp.126-136, p.127.

shape themselves in our time for the fulfillment of this prophecy, for need and much discussion will bring a new national agreement, and the political tumult awake again.¹⁸

Criticism should prophesy the content of arts which are rearrangements of elements of the past: it is given a complex function in terms of its relation to time and to its time. Whether its predictions are fulfilled or not, its mode incorporates the assembly of a series of pasts, and even a series of past analyses of cultural history.

Yeats's myths of fracture and of unity establish the authority with which he assaults and reconfigures readings of English poetic traditions. They also convert symbolism into a means of reconnection, association and equation, which generates histories as well as employing occult connotations of timelessness. Symbols and visions cited as autobiographical experience, as in the last section of the Spenser introduction, produce new syntheses and affinities while accumulating instances from different points in time. The "Divine Hierarchies" which Yeats offers as the privileged criteria of the poet allow him to dispute the criteria of other historical criticisms and arrangements. Nationality also becomes a fluid concept: although it may be invoked and established in some arguments, it may also be subjected to a kind of historical relativism which undermines essentialism by tracing the qualities of nations as functions of the state of their phasal developments, or the lack of developments. The continuing access to a great memory and the potential for imaginative communion which Yeats attributes in various degrees to the Ireland of his present and to that of Spenser's time can be significant as a general imaginative interconnection in opposition to the prominence of imperial and metropolitan culture, but it may also destabilise other Irish positions in cultural criticism: it relies on imaginings of imaginative openness, rather than language, religion, custom or social organization. In one version, Yeats allows paganism to have lasted in Ireland until Spenser's time: versions of golden ages were certainly common in contemporary journalism, but for Yeats they tend to promote a pagan nationalism. In much of his early writing, Yeats tended to treat Irish Catholic religious practices, at least in past centuries and when they concerned the rural peasantry, either as equivalent to pagan ones or as a superficial decoration and an impoverishment of them. His assumption of Catholicism into a general principle of belief involved various evasions of his own possible exclusion, but these evasions were not always

¹⁸ *Uncollected Prose* II, p.196.

successful. Throughout his career in the theatre this recurred as cause of objections of varied intensity by Catholic nationalists. Joep Leerssen shows how easy it was for objectors to quote Yeats's words back to him as evidence of deplorable heterodoxy.¹⁹ That these objections did not deter him, before he actually began to take pride in being the object of abuse, demonstrates the importance of Yeats's interpretations and manipulations of religious belief and practice. However, Yeats's heterodoxy had aims even beyond the project of negotiating and disarming Catholicism as the dominant national structure of communal belief by refusing it priority. The antagonistic nature of many of Yeats's exchanges with other writers on Irish culture may not simply be a matter of his anxiety to confer acceptability on subjects and positions which some political, religious or critical criteria would reject: in a sense his mode of association and rearrangement is essentially heterodox. It thrives on an aggressive adaptation of terms. A heterodoxy which claims to be orthodox on its own terms but which is less than clear about those terms and still gains energy from opposition and revisionism is one of Yeats's most fruitful poses. Although it perpetually imagines and invites imaginative communities it does so through a voracious appropriation of terms; potential for new arrangements and new audiences is potential for erosion of doctrines and exclusions.

Summarising some of tropes in nineteenth century historical and literary representations of Ireland, Joep Leerssen notes some recurrent patterns:

Artistic representations can concentrate either on the spatial arrangement of objects into a spectacle, or the temporal concatenation of events into a narrative. Interestingly, as we shall see, one way of unifying history proved to be to rearrange its consecutive events from a narrative order into a spectacle, a conspectus of juxtaposed 'freeze-frame' images.

The distinction between present-day, large-scale society and traditional small-scale community permeates much of nineteenth-century thought and accounts for much of the *imaginaire* of idyllic nostalgia. [...] Irish self-images of this period likewise tend to contrast a timeless and unchanging peasant community with the whirl of political antagonism in the metropolitan centres of contemporary society.²⁰

¹⁹ Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), pp.210-213.

²⁰ Leerssen, p.7.

These arrangements in modes of narrative, and the relations between writing and temporal successiveness will recur in my readings of Yeats's literary histories, as will his contrasts between the kinds of community and modes of change - or lack of it - through time of different societies in different places. Kinds of time become related to kinds of place, and in Yeats's critical judgment modes of writing also establish new relations to time while reactivating ancient and immanent imaginative resources. A kind of escape from the pressures of normal time actually becomes for Yeats the purpose of art: it also offers a model for imagining a society in an ideal condition of imaginative community and creativity.

Leerssen adds a concept of Bakhtin's, concentrating on the "correlation between the imagination of locale and of time in his [Bakhtin's] notion of *chronotope*":

Chronotope is the conjoined imagination of spatial and temporal patterns in the literary imagination. The notion offers a crucial insight that fictional time is non-Newtonian, and runs unevenly and at different parts of the narrative landscape, the distribution patterns of imagined time across imagined space being often highly revealing. As we shall see, Ireland as experienced and imagined in the nineteenth century was not so much a real country as a chronotope, bent in political space and warped in political time.²¹

Leerssen shows that the uneven passage of time described in writing is not restricted to fictional writing in representations of Ireland: it occurs across history, fiction and cultural criticism. It is also a feature of literary history. In applying his own notions of literary history Yeats recurrently returns to the concept that Ireland has unique links to an original state of warped time and lacks some kinds of historical development, and he attributes to that state exceptional imaginative conditions. He grants this chronotope a peculiar access to transhistorical symbolism, an order of symbols which can transcend history. This equivalence, that Ireland has escaped some progressions through time and as a result has a capacity for artistic harmony absent elsewhere, is common to much nineteenth-century Irish writing. However, in using the concept of the chronotope with reference to Yeats, I will be complicating it beyond Bakhtin's and Leerssen's purposes to trace some remarkable formulations of the relations between place, time and literature. The concept adds to my readings of Yeats's concerns about

audience and its location, and perhaps also to an understanding of Irish critics hostile to Yeats who wished to consign him to a perpetually decadent England, to what is in fact another chronotope.

Yeats takes the involvement between imagination and skewed time much further than many nineteenth-century Irish writers, in a reciprocal relationship. He suggests that great art effectively reinstates its own chronotope: when read, seen, or better, performed and heard; art can skew time, stabilise it, even escape it. Art can create a mode of life equal to it. His discussion of art as vision, as revelation, grants it the capacity to analyse “true” history: the history of imaginative conditions. Art as ritual becomes a way of stabilising and evading change. The distortion of time is apparent in representations of Ireland in literature and history; it is even more pronounced in a literary history which judges literary productions in terms of their capacity to escape some historical pressures and to note the patterns of others, even to predict and so transcend time by anticipating it. Though Yeats continually praises some kinds of stasis in Ireland, he also tries to predict and initiate a movement which is both new and a fulfilment of something original. In contrasting Ireland with England he contrasts two chronotopes, one in rooted stasis, one in perpetual cultural dissonance, but in his critical writings these techniques become more sophisticated in more refined and localised ones: the West of Ireland, Stratford, London and cities generally. He tests out successive variations. Ideally he seems to want art and Ireland to be congruent ways of escaping time, but he has some trouble in combining these, and in adapting general principles to respond to the needs and capacities of Ireland in the present. Where rural Ireland is in a chronotope of no time, London is a symbolic opposite, excessively driven in time, cut off from memory and stability and the achievement of an evasion of temporal pressure which is art.

These rearrangements of place and time in and around creativity are at work in Yeats’s readings of Spenser, and in his adaptations of Spenser. From his earliest adaptations and his earliest citations of Spenser in criticism, Yeats was fascinated by the regions portrayed in Spenser’s poetry, and made successive attempts to formulate the relation between Spenser’s capacity to create poetic regions, and

²¹ Leerssen, p.7. Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the chronotope in the novel”, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. M. Holquist (University of Texas Press, 1981), pp.84-258.

Spenser's and his own capacity to relate those to reality and to Ireland. The value which he attaches to such regions, in particular the gardens of Adonis, Phaedria and Acrasia, varies through his writing. In Yeats's later poetry he also adapts images from elsewhere in Spenser's poetry to memorialise his own poetic regions, his own sacred places. I suggest that the value which Yeats gives to symbols and to images makes them into chronotopes, places with a particular relation to time, imagined places which may be recalled and reconstructed in new creative complexes. Place is guaranteed the status of chronotope by the art or myth created in it, enriching it or commemorating it. In my final chapter I will show that Yeats's elegiac adaptations of Spenser in his later poetry are informed by a fear that poems may be the only places where values persist.

Yeats's readings of Spenser incorporate compulsive rearrangements of patterns originally provided by myths and literary works describing a fall from a harmonious mythic and mythopoeic condition into degenerate history. Because poetic metaphor may be significant history, it may also be taken literally, and these analyses merge literal and metaphoric senses. Irish versions of a fall from pastoral idylls and original conditions are of course many. In addition to their presence in theories of Irish origins, in accounts of invasion and betrayal and in Revival works on Irish peasantry, they have been available in other mutations.²² The mythic causes of fracture are equally diverse: commerce, the decline of the Irish language, allegory, science, didacticism (initially in English art but increasingly threatening in Ireland). In *The King's Threshold*, the expulsion of Seanchan and so of poetry from the discourse of government is another manifestation. One reason why Oisín was such a major mythological figure for Yeats is that Oisín's return to the world and his dialogue with Saint Patrick explicate a fall from a heroic condition into a Christian condition of restricted imaginative scope: Oisín guaranteed Yeats's formulation of a pagan aesthetic and his use of poetry, and particularly poetry central to national traditions, as significant history. The fall was established as a foundational national and poetic trope, but also potentially a perpetual one. In Yeats's literary histories all regrettable cultural developments tend to be seen as

²² W. J. McCormack notes the profusion of falls related in accounts of the decline of Anglo-Irish 'Big Houses', *From Burke to Beckett: Ascendancy Tradition and Betrayal in Literary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985; revised and enlarged, Cork: Cork University Press, 1994), p.10.

repeating original ones, so almost any change or division in the work of a poet can be related to the extent to which they moved away from or towards reviving the original functions of poetry, which both created and was made possible by a mode of community. Although the versions of history used in the Spenser introduction would seem to be rather late to be connected to an original state, this does not deter Yeats: his terms become principles which may be perceived acting through history although they recall origin. Yeats was not unusual in using racial and religious conflicts and invasions in distant Irish and English history and myth as models for ongoing cultural conditions, but his insistence on recruiting them for poetics, in reinserting poetic motifs into contemporary history, and most of all in his tendency to adapt them as perpetual tropes was exceptional and productive. This ordering of history as repetition does point towards the possibility of a fixed cyclical system; it also converts history into a ritual, an ordered performance of known patterns.

In the earlier of the essays in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, the essays which I discuss in my first chapter, Yeats is concerned with an ideal principle of imaginative community. In the later pieces, this is adapted to describe more contingent and restricted communities defined by shared practices: the ideal of general imaginative community seems to fade, to be partially replaced by less ambitious but more practical programs. The change in his use of notions of community can reasonably be correlated with changes in political beliefs, in a frustration with the failures of literary activity to provide general spiritual unity, or with growing scepticism about maintaining any community between past, present and future. I do not propose to suggest a single analysis, since these issues interact or merge, and to state categorically that a political or religious position necessarily determines a literary or literary-historical formulation, or vice versa, is often to propose an unsustainable order of priority. However, the contrast between the ways in which Yeats considers communities is useful, in that it indicates to what extent the ideal imaginative communities imagined in some of these relatively early pieces are, with regard to interpretation, almost contentless: they relate more to shared symbols and motifs than to any interpretative scheme. I examine and repeat some analogies between literature and religion in this study, but I also stress how Yeats's early formulations of chosen traditions except or demote specific doctrine, because it is the memory or the symbol rather than the interpretation of the memory

or the symbol which is valued. I will begin by looking at the negotiations through traditions in *Ideas of Good and Evil*.

CHAPTER I

LITERARY HISTORY, GOOD AND EVIL

1. Heterodoxy and Literary History

Ideas of Good and Evil was published in May 1903. Although some of the essays were written specifically for the collection, almost all had been published first, at least in part, in periodicals between 1895 and 1903. In an interview in October 1893, Yeats stated that he was planning a book of essays, but it was not until late 1901 that he and A. P. Watt had negotiated with A. H. Bullen, the publisher of the volume, to accept it in place of the unfinished and never-to-be-finished novel, *The Speckled Bird*.¹ George Mills Harper suggests that Bullen had become reluctant to accept a novel which dealt with the pursuit of occult wisdom, and that at some time between April and December 1901 he asked Yeats for a collection of essays instead.² Harper refers to the hostility of Dublin booksellers to Yeats on account of his heterodoxy; a hostility which Bullen encountered with surprise when visiting in May 1901.³ Yeats had already received advances for the novel from Bullen, and he had initially hoped that novel-writing might offer financial rewards which would allow him to escape journalism. Although he continued to work on the novel intermittently after 1901, this new arrangement may also suggest that he saw no very immediate prospect of its completion. Yeats had already experienced adverse reactions to heterodoxy from reviewers:

It is wonderful the skill with which these people play on subtle hints of heresy when they review A E or my self; & after all they are right from their point of view. It is as much their very respectable instinct for heresy, as rage against something they cannot understand, that keeps them forever harping on symbols, only they should be more open.⁴

¹ "Interview with Mr W B Yeats" by D N Dunlop for the *Irish Theosophist* 15th October 1893, in *W B Yeats: Interviews and Recollections I*, ed. by E H Mikhail (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp.19-23, p.22: "Then, I am getting ready for publication, next spring, a book of poems, which I intend calling, 'The Wind among the Reeds'; and, as soon afterwards as possible, a collection of essays, and lectures dealing with Irish nationality and literature, which will probably appear under the title of the 'Watch Fire'. In a letter to Lady Gregory, Yeats commented on Watt's advice to take a further advance and to offer Bullen the essays rather than the novel, *Collected Letters of W B Yeats III*, ed. by John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.138 & n, 22 Dec 1901.

² *Yeats's Golden Dawn* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1974), pp.106-7.

³ *Letters III*, pp.70-1.

⁴ *Letters III*, p.11, to Lady Gregory, Jan 1901. Yeats was referring to attacks on him in the *Leader*, and to a review of "The Shadowy Waters" in the *Freeman's Journal*, 1 Jan 1901.

In the critical writing which I will consider, Yeats not only persisted in openly discussing, rather than dramatising, some of his occult interests, he made heterodoxy into a principle. In place of a novel about a character wandering in search of an enabling spiritual tradition to follow, Bullen published a volume of critical essays which specifically combine occult interests with treatments of artistic and literary tradition. While still moderating some of his formulations, Yeats declared his promotion of heterodox tradition more openly than he had in *The Speckled Bird*. His refusal to draw a distinction between ideal religion and imaginative creativity extends to his characterisation of the failures of modern life: though not always specifically, he tends to associate a restrictive religious orthodoxy with failures of imaginative community. His classic example of such imaginative repression is English Puritanism in the past, but his critique of that also shades into a potential critique of those in the present who saw hegemonic orthodox Catholicism as a *sine qua non* of Irish nationalism. This shift from a literary history analysing contextual forces active on the literature of particular periods of the past to one delineating recurrent or perpetual patterns is typical in *Ideas of Good and Evil*. In opposition to such deplorable patterns he sets ideal traditions of poetic creativity by which he links creativity of the present and of various pasts and, potentially, of the future. A slippage between past and present may be a form of community: it implies an achievement of imaginative community across time.

The negotiation around orthodoxies extends to every level of style. *Ideas of Good and Evil*, although compiled from essays published in periodicals, pursues a crusade against the aspects of modern culture which it associates with journalism. In its style and in its pronouncements on language and on community, it offers alternatives to the temporary and superficial opinions and to the creation of pseudo-communities which it ascribes to the culture of the contemporary press.⁵ The arrangement of the essays, the interaction between their subjects, and the hierarchies of modes of life and of imaginative production which the essays put forward, all grapple with the problem of being contemporary while avoiding

⁵ On 5th April 1903, shortly before publication of the book, Yeats wrote to Bullen: "to remind you of our rule to send no copies of my books to Dublin papers. You did not send 'Celtic Twilight' & it

ephemerality. In another remark to Lady Gregory about D. P. Moran, Yeats claimed that “like so many Irishmen he cannot distinguish between journalism, which is written for a man’s own day & literature which is written however it may fail of its purpose, for all days.”⁶ The distinction is reiterated in the essays in *Ideas of Good and Evil*. They offer literary histories, and place themselves at crucial points in literary history, while claiming that literary and imaginative histories are the true histories of the world, and more particularly, of nations; and they insistently attach notions of time and perceptions of time to standards of critical judgment and to modes of writing. The fact that Yeats had become disenchanted with journalistic controversy in Dublin leaves the book in an awkward position: by setting out his own terms and his own grounds of argument, Yeats risked failing to engage at all with a potentially hostile audience. Some of the essays had first been published in England, some in Ireland, and in much of the book there is an underlying concern with who the audience for it should be. Ideals for Irish culture and analyses of the failures of English culture often seem to leave the implied audience as perpetually a potential rather than a real community, rather as those hopes for the future of Irish culture are articulated through ideas of a potential source waiting to be brought into realisation.

In these two chapters I will consider Yeats’s treatments of traditions, of national and artistic communities and of imaginative influence in *Ideas of Good and Evil*. I will examine the negotiations and associations by which he relates different authors and subjects, and suggest some of the advantages of his concepts of eternity, revelation, prophecy, the great memory and phases of spiritual history, for a poet organising his past influences and turning to new ones. I will concentrate throughout on Yeats’s formulations of and negotiations through literary history. I will note development on these points between the essays, stressing the recurrence of motifs through essays on apparently different subjects. First, I will briefly examine some of the ways in which *Ideas of Good and Evil* articulates ways of reading poetry and poetic history which enshrine in Yeats’s creative aesthetic the

is still more desirable not to send ‘Ideas of Good and Evil’. Reviews in Dublin papers sell no copies & I don’t see why I should give them the opportunity of attacking me”. *Letters* III, pp.341-2.

⁶ *Letters* III, p.25.

potential for recurrent development and for the reception of successive influences, and I will explain the division of my treatment of the book into two chapters.

Yeats's own comments on the volume offer some introductions to the ways in which he arranged literary histories, including the literary history into which he immediately inserted the volume itself. On 14th May 1903, Yeats wrote to George Russell, sending a copy of the collection with some remarks upon it:

The book is only one half of the orange for I only got a grip on the other half very lately. I am no longer in much sympathy with an essay like the *Autumn of the Body*, not that I think that essay untrue. But I think I mistook for a permanent phase of the world what was only a preparation. The close of the last century was full of a strange desire to get out of form to get to some kind of disembodied beauty and now it seems to me the contrary impulse has come. I feel about me and in me an impulse to create form, to carry the realisation of beauty as far as possible. The Greeks said that the Dionysiac enthusiasm preceded the Apollonic, and that the Dionysiac was sad and desirous, but that the Apollonic was joyful and self sufficient. Long ago I used to define to myself these two influences as the transfiguration on the mountain and the incarnation, only the Transfiguration comes before the Incarnation in the natural order. I would like to know what you think of the book, and if you could make your Hermitists read it I have a notion that it would do them a world of good.⁷

The Nietzschean terms reflect Yeats's absorption in his latest enthusiasm, but the arrangement of modes of critical and creative thought into oppositions is an adaptation, and a further personal internalisation, of a technique which is already evident in the volume described: the insistent detection of movements and phases, including autobiographical ones. The letter is confusingly ambivalent towards the book, suggesting that Yeats's thought has superseded much of the book while also hinting that the essays would make useful instruction for Russell's colleagues. Perhaps most significantly, the letter evokes a new system of thought, in which a previous position is incorporated as one element in an opposition, rather than being rejected. Among all of the arrangements of tradition in this period, perhaps the most enabling one is this accommodation of Yeats's own previous stances. The ambivalence might suggest that immediately after the publication of *Ideas of Good and Evil* Yeats was able to recognise that the volume demonstrated the development, and not just the final result of the development, of his thought. I will

be noting the occurrences of predictions and expectations of transfiguration or revelation in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, and I will suggest that the anticipation of a new age of imaginative activity is gradually replaced in the book and in the period by a tendency to make and remake literary and spiritual histories with greater flexibility, turning the capacity to recognise change of era into a difficult individual achievement and a personal mental act rather than an expression of belief in a general revelation. The anticipated revelation seems to involve perfected imaginative communion and a vague transcendence, in a return to an original state of imaginative freedom. It is succeeded by a new confidence in re-casting histories, itself perhaps a result of disenchantment with expectations of emotional, spiritual or national change. This confidence in manipulating imaginative histories is evident initially in the preoccupation with contrasting characterisations of what constitutes the temporal and what the eternal, then in a concern with the shifts between a variety of phases. Metaphors of change and local changes of critical style are accompanied by broader projections of history defined in terms of further shifts.

Studies of periods of crucial “development” in Yeats’s work can be frustrated by the recognition that there are few if any periods of his career which could not be said to manifest development. The particular significance of Yeats’s critical writing in this period may be that it is in these essays that we see him creating an aesthetic which overtly accommodates and generates successive stylistic developments, and combines contemporary criticism and prophecy with notions of phasal history in circular systems which re-imagine modes of progression while frustrating narrative and linear models of development.

A similar letter to John Quinn dated the next day puts the book more firmly behind him and repeats the Nietzschean antithesis, but adapts the other terms quite carefully, perhaps to suit the recipient. It also elucidates further.

I think you will like it, for it is certainly thoughtful. I feel that much of it is out of my present mood. That it is true but no longer true for me. I have been in a good deal better health lately and that and certain other things has made me look on the world I think with somewhat more defiant eyes. The book is, I think, too lyrical, too full of

⁷ *Letters* III pp.369-70. In this case Yeats’s spelling gives the ambiguity of “desirous”. The Dionysiac impulse and the lack of self-sufficient stability might suggest “delirious”, but the reflections on Yeats’s own earlier verse and the letter quoted below would suggest “desirous”.

aspirations after remote things, too full of desires. Whatever I do from this out will, I think, be more creative. I will express myself so far as I express myself in criticism at all, by that sort of thought that leads straight to action, straight to some sort of craft. I have always felt that the soul has two movements primarily, one to transcend forms, and the other to create forms. Nietzsche, to whom you have been the first to introduce me, calls these the Dionysic and the Apollonic respectively. I think I have to some extent got weary of that wild God Dionysius, and I am hoping that the Far-Darter will come in his place.⁸

This declares a new dispensation, but I will suggest that *Ideas of Good and Evil* prepares for this position, perhaps most clearly in its development of the confidence to assign phases and to order his own work and that of other writers. It both exercises and exorcises what Yeats would come to see as the “Dionysic” characteristics of his preoccupations in the 1890s and begins the invocation of the “Apollonic”. The period between the writing of the earlier essays and the publication of the collection was one of rapid and increasingly self-conscious adaptation in Yeats’s concepts of the relations of art to its age and to its audience. I will consider the manifestations of this adaptation through the essays, and seek to identify Yeats’s conceptions of literary history and of the operations of tradition. By combining the essays of this period, *Ideas of Good and Evil* demonstrates a new sense of the responsibilities of poetry and of criticism, and makes claims for a legitimate lack of responsibility to conventional history and to rationalism. The possibility that an analysis may be “true but no longer true for me” also suggests something of the enabling but contingent nature of Yeats’s experiments with phases.

The dating of Yeats’s readings of Nietzsche has been examined, and disputed, by several critics. Kelly and Schuchard show that Quinn sent Yeats his copy of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in September 1902, writing on 27th “I don’t know whether you are acquainted with Nietzsche’s writing or not”, thus contradicting Quinn’s own later recollection that he had discussed Nietzsche with Yeats in August of that year.⁹ Oppel chooses to see Quinn’s letter as “a cover-up” as part of the protracted competition with Moore over the writing of “Where There is

⁸ *Letters* III, p. 372.

⁹ *Letters* III, p.239n, p.284n.

Nothing”, but this seems far-fetched.¹⁰ Reeves and Gould discount the notion that the revised version of “Where There is Nothing”, composed when Yeats was reading *Thus Spake Zarathustra* contains any new Nietzschean matter (on 26th December, Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory that he was reading Nietzsche avidly).¹¹ When thanking Quinn for the book, Yeats remarked that he had already bought a pamphlet selection of Nietzsche’s work, but was disappointed to find how little it contained.¹² Foster suggests that Yeats may have learned something of Nietzsche from John Gray and from Arthur Symons, and dates Quinn’s successive gifts of further volumes.¹³ However, there is little firm evidence for Yeats having much direct knowledge of Nietzsche prior to late 1902, after most of the essays in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, and contemporary with the completion of the Spenser introduction. Several critics have cited the one crucial exception, an indirect source through which Yeats seems to have encountered Nietzsche: the *Savoy* published three introductory essays on Nietzsche by Havelock Ellis in 1896. As Reeves and Gould note, this was while Yeats was working on his three Blake essays for the same magazine, the first two in the same issues as Ellis’s second and third; they also suggest that Yeats may have seen Ellis’s essays in draft.¹⁴ Whatever the extent of Yeats’s interest in Ellis’s essays, he came to associate Nietzsche and Blake in a tradition, as I will discuss later, and altered one of those essays to recognise this. However, except in this particular case, I do not consider that Nietzsche is a significant presence in *Ideas of Good and Evil*. Reeves and Gould show the influence of Ellis’s essays on “The Tables of the Law”, but also they provide an important stress on Yeats’s religious concerns and beliefs, which would have prevented him from accepting Nietzsche completely.¹⁵ The modes of argument about culture and tradition which Yeats employs in his critical essays certainly do

¹⁰ *Mask and Tragedy: Yeats and Nietzsche, 1902-10* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987), p.45.

¹¹ Marjorie Reeves and Warwick Gould, *Joachim of Fiore and the Myth of the Eternal Evangel in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1987), pp.251-2; letter to Lady Gregory, *Letters* III, p.284.

¹² *Letters* III, p.239 & n; p.313n. The pamphlet was Thomas Common’s 1900 translation of selections from Nietzsche, but I have been unable to date Yeats’s acquisition of it exactly.

¹³ Roy Foster, *W. B. Yeats: a Life. I. The Apprentice Mage* (Oxford: O. U. P., 1997), pp.213, 272, 575n, 584n. “Symons had written an essay ‘Nietzsche and Tragedy’, and WBY’s own theorizing about drama, and the phases of ancient Greek culture, used Nietzsche’s formulations before he met Quinn,” p.272.

¹⁴ Reeves and Gould, p.238.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp.231-54.

anticipate his later strong interest in Nietzsche, and even explain his enthusiasm, but Blake was still the major influence on Yeats's aphoristic style.

Ideas of Good and Evil juxtaposes essays on occult experience; on Romantic, Renaissance and late nineteenth-century poetry and drama; on visual and poetic symbolism, on illustration and on national and universal spiritual history. This range is enough to establish its resistance to limitation of imaginative resources and interests, but this resistance is also reformulated again and again within the essays. Affirmations of the potential of unfettered imagination recur in and even unify the book, but they are more than just exercises in extrovert writing: the unfettered imagination is constantly perceived as itself a means of connection and unification. Within essays this potential for imaginative communion becomes a principle for associating decontextualised poems and parts of poems, people, symbols and subjects. The substance of a vision turns out to be about making images; certain selected works of visual art or poetic or occult constructs become symbols of symbolism: the ubiquitous associative procedures work across layered essay structures to create intense evocations of creativity. Diversity is countered by surprising equivalences and syntheses: kabbalistic systems of symbolism appear not only in the essay "Magic", but also in the account of system in visual art in "Symbolism in Painting". The notion of the artist as enchanter recurs throughout several essays, and in "The Symbolism of Poetry" Yeats attempts to push it beyond metaphor.

John Lanham offers a useful introduction to the pattern of some of the longer essays, in which Yeats combines polemic with techniques for associating subjects:

Yeats engages the reader in a plot which expounds the points which he wishes to make. Usually the plot is an antagonism toward a theory, class or philosophy: this means might better be called 'oratorical'. For any one of Yeats's three 'interests' - the literary tradition, nationalism, magic - it involves setting up a dichotomy, rejecting one side, and then synthesizing the other to one or both of the other interests.¹⁶

The unity which is effected between subjects and between essays is not static: it involves insistent movement to cover further subjects, while incorporating claims about movements in past modes of thought and creation. The grounds of exposition

¹⁶ John Alan Lanham, *A Critical Edition of Ideas of Good and Evil by W.B. Yeats with Complete Collation, Notes and Commentary* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Toronto, 1976), p.59.

and of argument are constantly shifting between varieties of theory and experience. Yeats's doctrines on poetry past, present and future, on magic, and on national cultural development claim support from each other in circular and mutual reliance. Before considering the essays one at a time, I will identify some of the ways in which connections and mutual endorsements operate. Their connective procedures, reinforced by successive approaches and returns to subjects, undermine assumptions as well as creating relationships. Some of the essays show their original forms as lectures, and the sections through which the essays proceed offer successive perorations, diversified by meditative and speculative passages. These movements in the local style of the essays enliven the examinations set forth in those essays of speech and writing, of stylistic conventions and of poetic language, while they juxtapose modes of writing which might be categorised through their different relations to time: analyses of past history, meditative or more urgent prose-poetry, the presentness of the performance of past literary works, personal memory, elegy, statements on present conditions, representative anecdotes, aspirations, fears and predictions. David Gardiner astutely remarks that "it is one of the strange virtues of Yeats's prose that heaping one conditional upon another often, in the end, effects a certainty."¹⁷ This is true whether the accumulation is of potential loss or potential generation: the potentials reach towards statements of conditions. The peculiar effect of this in *Ideas of Good and Evil* is often an elision between hopes for literary or spiritual movements, and predictions of those movements. The elision depends on the participation of the reader in the imaginative enterprise: participation in the book's reassessments and enterprises, it is suggested, guarantees the creation of the imaginative community which is sought. The tonal and rhetorical variations in the essays also respond to the movements between personal, meditative visionary experience and its counterparts in shared artistic experience, and in shared imaginative possessions. "Speaking to the Psalter", with its theme of the transformation of individual reading experience into ritualistic communal experience, describes a realisation of themes which run throughout the book. The essay was presented as a lecture, and even in print it denigrates reading in favour of performance. The preoccupation with the uses of

¹⁷ David Gardiner, "'To Go There as a Poet Merely': Spenser, Dowden, and Yeats", *New Hibernia Review* 1:2 (Summer 1997), 112-133, p.133.

rhythm in that essay supports an association between artistic performance and occult ritual: the ordering of words in poetic performance is credited with the achievement of imaginative communities in the present, but also with the past. The implications of this association extend to *Ideas of Good and Evil* itself, in that the volume has its own passages of rhythmic prose which promote the acceptance of a notion of the imagination, a notion which is offered as both new and old, indeed as transcending categorisation as new or old.

The “great memory” and other recurrent motifs like the “supernatural artist”, several particular quotations and misquotations from Blake, appeals to the standards of eternity rather than of immediacy and the predictions and promotions of national or universal imaginative community function as guarantees of potentially shared experience beneath the more specific arguments: they are invoked for reassuring authority to support more complex interactions of aesthetics, history and occult knowledge. The accumulated essays suggest more systematic arrangements of thought than they actually elucidate: various kinds of “procession”, appeals to the “Divine Hierarchies”, and readings of “the world as a dictionary of types and symbols” intimate immortal schemes of order while permitting polemical revision of categories and of relations. These enabling terms, though, ultimately bring their own problems, since literary and imaginative history in these formulations are composed largely of antitheses, potentials and failures to realise potential.

Yeats’s “new religion, almost an infallible church of poetic tradition” went through many reformations, and this volume makes some particularly sophisticated contributions to that process of reformation.¹⁸ I stress the religious analogy because of its particular relevance to this volume, in which religious motifs recur, with a polemical modulation between metaphorical and literal application. This modulation allows Yeats to choose and to declare what he will and will not be responsible to, and to claim a sacerdotal status for poet and critic while also experimenting with creative heterodoxies. This heterodoxy leaves the social status of poets and their elected audiences in some doubt in these essays: they may be seen as outcasts, magicians, aristocrats, practitioners of a secret craft or priests of

¹⁸ *Autobiographies*, p.115-6.

an accepted religion. This uncertainty remains unresolved. In the accounts of spiritual history offered, heterodoxy may become orthodoxy and vice versa. Such vacillation is common in the book: at some points, notably when Yeats recollects his earlier beliefs, the communal imagination or memory suggests a “supernatural artist”; in other manifestations it seems to lack any connotations of unitary authority and indeed seems to liberate the creative artist through this potential for non-hierarchical accessibility. Symbolic associations seem to be fixed by tradition or by a neoplatonic order in some formulations, in others they are allowed to be arbitrary. The absence of any clarification of these points permits modulation. These variations are juxtaposed in single sentences, in sections within essays, and between essays: particularly in the earlier essays, *Ideas of Good and Evil* offers few precise and entirely consistent positions, rather it articulates a capacity freely to associate and to select as exercises of creative potential.

The relations between religions and the arts are varied in these essays: religion can offer analogies for the history of imaginative creation, art may become a religion, art and religion may be equivalent modes of spirituality in contrast to utilitarianism. The vacillation between analogy, equivalence and substitution produces particular conditions in the treatment of religion: Yeats’s synthetic techniques evoke a spirituality which seeks to be at once exalted, shared, and heterodox. This complex presents some difficulties when it is projected into the future, in hopes for Irish literature, in that the preparation of a wider audience for heterodox beliefs and practices may fail, and be transformed into a determined heterodoxy which disdains a broad audience. As to the creation of histories, this complex demands the establishment of traditions which are antinomian and prophetic, histories of which the changing circumstances may suggest the possibility of a shift in favour of their values, which are presented not as progress but as restitution of an original state. Many of the essays in *Ideas of Good and Evil* approach this difficult task of describing values with an “alternative” history to the histories of power but with the potential to gain a new recognition. “Magic” and “The Body of the Father Christian Rosencrux” are perhaps the clearest examples, but most of the essays reformulate this same set of principles.

In *Joachim of Fiore and the Myth of the Eternal Evangel in the Nineteenth Century*, Marjorie Reeves and Warwick Gould trace an important strain of

“spiritual” historiography in the work of some of Yeats’s major predecessors in the composition of cultural histories, and through them into Yeats’s own work. Joachim’s analyses and predictions influenced many notions of Renaissance, and in Symonds and Pater particularly these doctrines were adapted to describe specifically imaginative creations rather than religious developments. The authors note that Joachim’s presence in Yeats’s work seems to have several aspects and to have reached Yeats through several conduits; they show that Joachim was given the part of “a ‘walk-on’ prophet” by various writers, some of them read by Yeats.¹⁹ The principal single aspect of Joachimism for Yeats was the prediction of a new, third, age of imaginative conditions, a new dispensation. However, at least as important for Yeats as the specific nature of Joachim’s beliefs and legacy was his status and his example, which offered several qualities to Yeats as exponent of alternative traditions: as an exemplary author of disruptive but potentially sacred works, as at once heretical and religious, as spiritual historian capable of delineating the spiritual history of the world, as prophet capable of predicting a new world order to succeed to that history, and through all this making of histories also claiming an access to “eternal” doctrines. Reeves and Gould consider the centrality of Joachim in the apocalyptic stories, in which Yeats dramatises fanaticism, prophecy, and the failure of new revelation to be shared and effective. They also trace back to Renan’s adaptation of Joachim the “spiritual potential” which Yeats attributes to the Celt in “The Celtic Element in Literature”.²⁰ In Arnold’s work, and in that of his followers, the notion of Celtic Renaissance derives from analyses of religious movements in the thirteenth century. I examine Yeats’s modification of the Celticism of the new age in the next chapter.

Lanham observes that in *Ideas of Good and Evil* Yeats “required a definition [of symbolism]... that could encompass Shakespeare, Rossetti, Morris, Blake, Shelley, and the *symbolistes*, and yet would emphasise the centrality of the mystic symbols he had used in occult experiments”.²¹ However, Yeats does not accept the complete oeuvres of these authors into an exemplary tradition: his doctrines are propounded to a great extent through only a partial inclusion of his

¹⁹ p.243.

²⁰ pp.143-4; pp.215-7.

²¹ Lanham, p.31.

forebears. We are presented with Yeatsian literary history as an energetic practice. These essays can take the form of dramatised occult experiments, in which Yeats tests aspects of his subjects to determine which conform to his notions of symbolism. This produces some inventive treatments of literary history since those parts of works which Yeats approves, he tends to relate to “eternity” or to a posited pre-historical condition of poetry, while also placing them with reference to phases of imaginative history. Personal anecdote also complicates the process: experience can also indicate some of the criteria for access to “eternity”. Yeats claimed that selections of experience transcend ephemerality, and these selections tend to be characterised by occult experience which also has connotations and elements of literary structure. Visions incorporating orders of symbols can equally be the matter of poetry or of occult experience, and so suggest a potential equivalence between art and available life experience. Such visions and revelations are further structured into literary histories, and are located in relation to original imaginative conditions, and to evocations of eternity. They add another temporal mode to the modes of the essays, complicating the antithesis which Yeats repeatedly re-establishes between visionary writing on one side and journalism and criticism of life on the other.

The volume is itself a product of selection. Lanham notes that Yeats chose 13 essays from “150 periodical publications of prose criticism (excluding letters to editors) between the years 1886 and 1901”.²² In fact, the earliest essay used was “The Moods” (1895). To these Yeats added his introduction to W. T. Horton’s *A Book of Images*, and five further essays written specifically for the volume. Lanham rightly adds that “stylistic grace” was a criterion. It is also clear that Yeats chose essays and excerpts from essays which were not excessively specific to immediately contemporary publications or occasions, or, as in several cases, which could be easily edited to remove such specificity. The exceptions to this are significant: Yeats’s readings of some recent and contemporary works are included, and their selection is justified on the grounds that they are both relevant to non-ephemeral literary movements in the present and that they embody literary qualities which reach beyond the present, relating the demands of the present to ancient and timeless artistic practices and principles. An edited review of a season of

²² *ibid.* p.4.

Shakespeare's history plays is also included, and that essay considers performance of poetic drama in terms of its peculiar relation to history, to literary history, and to time itself.

Play with notions of time and of phase characterises much of the book. While Yeats does produce his own unorthodox versions of historical phases, his notions of transcendent symbolic processions and systems can involve disregarding time as a mode of arrangement: he juxtaposes recent experience with conjecture about pre-history, accumulates quotations from historically separated sources and treats nineteenth-century poetic symbols and those of ancient myth as equivalent. Revision of order and succession extends to the order of the essays themselves within the volume. This has no direct relation to the order of composition or of original publication, but it invites the reader to recognise connections and possible progressions. Lanham suggests one interpretation of the order of the essays, and adds in brackets the chronological order of composition for comparison:

Exposition:

“What is Popular Poetry?” (15)

“Speaking to the Psalter” (16)

“Magic” (13)

Development in terms of the tradition:

“The Happiest of the Poets” (17)

“The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry” (11)

“At Stratford-on-Avon” (12)

“William Blake and the Imagination” (4)

“William Blake and his Illustrations to *The Divine Comedy*”

(3)

Theoretical justification:

“Symbolism in Painting” (6)

“The Symbolism of Poetry” (10)

“The Theatre” (9)

“The Celtic Element in Literature” (7)

Inevitable Apotheosis (Climax):

“The Autumn of the Body” (8)

“The Moods” (1)

“The Body of the Father Christian Rosencruc” (2)

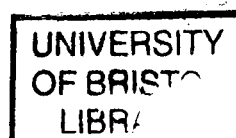
“The Return of Ulysses” (5)

Denouement:

“Ireland and the Arts” (14)

“The Galway Plains” (18)

“Emotion of Multitude” (19)



The last seven essays to be written are placed at the beginning and at the end, containing the previous ones.²³ In terms of strict chronology, the book complicates progression. The group which Lanham terms “Inevitable Apotheosis” are early and predict a new age, but other essays also do so in more sophisticated or less optimistic ways while joining prediction to particular programmes of action: the order modifies prediction but does not entirely negate it. Among the changes of imaginative phase, past, present and potential, notions of time and of development become metaphorical. Development becomes a means of formulating aesthetic principles, but these principles involve the rejection of linear modes of cultural progression and analysis. The shifts between subjects can seem evasive in individual essays; in the volume as a whole the synthetic tendency becomes a principle.

Ideas of Good and Evil went through several stages of generally minor revision, from original periodical publications of essays, for the second edition also in 1903, for the 1908 *Collected Works in Verse and Prose of W. B. Yeats*, for the third edition in 1914, for *Essays* in 1924, and for the version which appears in *Essays and Introductions*. At no stage were the essays significantly rewritten, but many changes were made to punctuation and in order to correct misquotations and spelling of titles and proper names. Later editions tended to restrict rhetorical exuberance. Lanham states that the changes from the periodical publications for the first edition tended to lighten punctuation, which originally reflected the house styles of the periodicals. My quotations and references are from the 1903 second edition, which as Lanham notes, is in fact a second corrected impression of the first edition. This edition best represents Yeats’s stylistic intentions in 1903. Most of the corrections in it are to names, titles and misquotations, only four are grammatical.²⁴ I include page references to *Essays and Introductions* as well as to *Ideas of Good and Evil*, for convenience.

Given the interaction between subjects, I suggest that in selecting his essays Yeats sought a balance in representing his various interests: after all, the dismissal of categorisation and his insistence on potential imaginative unity can only operate to any effect when they relate material conventionally assumed to be distinct. The

²³ *ibid.* pp.61-3.

²⁴ *ibid.* full textual history, pp.72-111.

diversity of subjects and the recurrence of associations and patterns in them present some problems when dividing the book in terms of its principal concerns. Although I will recognise some of the more significant effects of the juxtaposition of particular essays, I will treat the essays in groups according to the central subjects of each, while noting that interrelations, and Yeats's tendency to borrow terms from one field to employ them in another, make any firm distinctions impossible. It will become evident, too, that in sorting the essays I am also stressing stylistic patterns, such as the recurrence of predictions, the more complex arrangements of literary histories, and the more polemical approaches used to consider issues of audience.

In this first chapter I will consider the essays on Blake and on Shelley, "Magic", and the shorter pieces on imagination and imaginative history: "The Moods", "The Body of the Father Christian Rosencrux", "*The Return of Ulysses*", "The Autumn of the Body" and "The Galway Plains", "Emotion of Multitude". These are mostly but not exclusively among the earlier essays written, and they have in common preoccupations with communal imagination, with the subjective individual's access to eternal symbolism and perception, and an enthusiasm with characterising spiritual history in rhetorical flourishes. In terms of his approach to literary history, in the essays on Blake and on Shelley Yeats devises modes of selection, revision, idealisation and prediction by using terms partially derived from the work of his subjects; in the other essays in this group similar ideas of time and of eternity are used to describe even less conventional phases and traditions. Although these pieces clearly draw on the subjectivism Yeats associated with Shelley, and the rejection of heterogeneous matter which he associated with Hallam's essay on Tennyson, their articulation of the limitations of temporally-bound perception compared to untrammelled imaginative access generally evades precise formulation in favour of energetic inclusiveness. The imaginative community posited as original and anticipated as imminent remains a vaguely desired transcendence, characterised by the nullification of distinctions rather than by definition. One of the areas of concern which remains notably problematic is that of audience: these essays alternately anticipate the recovery and lament the loss of imaginative community, but generally revert to the individual poet-critic's exceptional powers of perception and connection. I begin with these essays because

they prompt consideration of the ways in which Yeats constructed communal, imaginative and spiritual history. In the second chapter I will examine the rest of the volume, which employs these notions of time and of community in considerations of the functions of symbolism, of the further revision of literary history, of practical artistic programmes and so of audience as a rather more pressing concern. I will show that these notions required modification when Yeats applied them to complex realities and practicalities and to those literary forebears who did not fit into his pantheon as easily as did Blake and Shelley, and I will further examine the transmutation of prophecy of real change into metaphor, although no firm distinction can be made. The shift towards a loss of confidence in prophecy did not lead Yeats to abandon his terms, but to make them increasingly diverse and sophisticated, and I will stress the theoretical advantages for Yeats, as well as the problems, of having developed these idiosyncratic modes of treating his subjects.

In two essays George Bornstein observes that Yeats tended to see poets whom he admired both as Romantics and as mystics.²⁵ Yeats could turn sub-traditions, even speculative ones, into alternative modes of tradition. *Ideas of Good and Evil* is sustained by similar attempts to find common concerns with forebears, and to use this common ground as a medium for articulating Yeats's interactions with them. This involves some selective, over-literal, or simply distorted readings of poetry, literary history and biography; it oscillates between a concern with genres and a disregard for them; it also produces some convoluted forms of idiosyncratic historicism. The first group of essays experiments with ways of imagining imaginative influence in time. Yeats's quotations from Blake and Shelley return to two points in particular: assertions of the original functions of poetry in ancient times, and the capacity of the poetic imagination to transcend time. A well known section from *A Defence of Poetry*, quoted in Yeats's essay on Shelley, provides an example of the formulations from which Yeats derives his own successive approaches to the temporal conditions and relations of poetry:

²⁵ "Yeats's Romantic Dante", *Poetic Remaking: the Art of Browning, Yeats and Pound* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania University Press, 1988), pp.73-96 discusses Yeats's view of Dante as the first Romantic, with himself as the last (p.73), and Yeats's comparable efforts to see Browning, Shelley, Blake, Dante and Tennyson as mystics. "The Making of Yeats's Spenser" describes Yeats's Romantic reading of Spenser, *Yeats Annual* 2 (1984), pp.21-9.

‘Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called in the earliest epoch of the world legislators or prophets, and a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things are to be ordained, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flowers and the fruit of latest time.’ (*IGE* p.94; *E&I* p.67)

The poet’s innate capacity for transhistorical and prophetic perception serves several purposes in Yeats’s criticism. It allows a negative selective historicism in which elements of a forebear’s work are considered as partaking of eternity, whereas other elements are rejected as trapped in the moralistic or philosophical limitations of their time. The ideal poet’s ability to transcend limitation becomes the model for judgment, and, professedly, the means for selection. This principle also informs the rejection of criticism of life in poetry. From this position, poetry which sums up its age fails, and one of the principal preoccupations of *Ideas of Good and Evil* is the attempt to describe elements of poetry - symbols, myths, or ideals of passion and beauty - with which the poet can achieve imaginative community with an audience and still avoid the perishability of quotidian subject matter. Escape from temporal limitation is creatively, if ambiguously, combined with attention to those who recognise the significant spirit of the age, and the shifts within it. In Yeats’s adaptations from Shelleyan and Blakean formulations of the poet’s role, changes in the spirit of the age, and the capacity to recognise or even to effect those changes, become crucial. These adaptations also come to suggest cyclical patterns in which aspects of spirit of the age are always undergoing growth or diminution.

The imaginative condition of Ireland is at issue in most of these essays, but it is not entirely clear which condition obtains in Ireland: rural Ireland is a source for examples of escape from limitation, but Yeats begins “Ireland and the Arts” with the words “The arts have failed”, and rejects much nineteenth-century nationalist poetry. This alternation between hope and the possibility of failure in Ireland is the central concern of the volume. In *Ideas of Good and Evil*, Ireland has significant potential because in terms of Yeatsian imaginative history, it can go either way, and as the book speaks to potential communities, it also speaks about them. Yeats’s alternations between pride, optimism and pessimism for Irish culture

are also complicated by ambiguities about where, socially and geographically, he places himself in his assessments. The vacillation between essays may be read as in part a function of the particular disputes and occasions for which each article was written; in the volume as a whole, it becomes a testing of the potentials of contemporary national literary history.

Yeats's versions of historical phases have sub-sections: they can be the phases of races, of nations, of classes, of audiences. In each case, though, they are histories of communities and of different forms of community: nation or state; believers in common folklore, the readership of epic or lyric poetry, or readers of newspapers, the audiences for different modes of drama. Artistic modes are not only considered in relation to these communities, communities are defined by their imaginative and artistic modes. Imaginative productions are guaranteed status in these essays because they are the instruments as well as the symptoms of community. In the original state which is so often invoked as an example, community is imaginative communion; in later developments, imaginative success is a restitution of that community from historical decay and disruption. This hoped-for restitution is a mode of nationalism, and an adaptation of nationalism, but it persistently discusses nationalism in terms of imagination. Politically, this claims great authority for the poet-critic, and implicitly for a responsive audience, and it also attaches importance to the choice and construction of models and of literary histories. This restitution allows for active synthesis between social groups and different audiences; it cites the example of unspoilt, original communities, but does not look solely to them for a revivification which may be Irish and imaginative. The relations of imagination to power are also mysterious (in a religious sense): in some formulations, spirituality and imagination are presented in an inverse, compensatory, relation to utilitarianism, power, and, usually, England. This might imply that political success would entail spiritual failure, but Yeats suggests that the apocalyptic recreation of original community would allow growth in both areas of experience. Yeats is working here with some issues prevalent throughout nineteenth century formulations of Irish culture, but he is remarkable in his reliance on claiming a perception of "true" history, and of the patterns by which "true" history proceeds, as imaginative and poetic qualities. In various constructs, all of these superimpositions of literary and political themes rely on the acceptance by an

audience of the perceptions of the patterns of imaginative history made by a poet, and I describe this as mysterious, because religious prophecy serves as the model for this kind of assurance.

However, the elision between myth, prophecy and persuasion is shared by other modes of analysis. In a chapter on “Myth in the age of the world view”, Michael Bell considers Marx and Freud in terms of their uses of myth, and a comparison with Yeats is instructive:

They shared the view that conscious and apparent meanings are often an unwitting mask for a true state of affairs which has to be raised to consciousness. [...] Freud sought the rigour of science, and his conviction that in a scientific purview everything must be explicable was a powerful aid to inquiry, but his methods could not be submitted to the scientific criterion of disproof. In this respect, his readiness to claim the poets as his predecessors, and his use of a mythic nomenclature for psychological complexes, rightly suggest that his influential mapping of the human psyche as conscious, unconscious and superego was essentially mythic; something more than a heuristic fiction or hypothesis, yet less than a scientifically verifiable truth. In Marx, likewise, there was a notorious ambiguity as to whether the historical process he described, the gradual replacement of the bourgeois order by socialism, was a scientific prediction or a utopian call to revolutionary action. Doubtless much of the power of his thought arose from the ambiguous combination and although the mixture was seized up by his critics as a weakness, it is not self-evident that it is so.²⁶

Myth may assist a transition from analysis to acceptance and practice which is not otherwise attainable. Clearly Yeats’s analyses of the modulations of imaginative community have very different aims and terms from the analyses of Marx or of Freud, but the most fundamental difference is in the functions of myth and imagination: the unconscious potential which he wishes to realise is above all an imaginative potential, not an application of the imagination for another purpose. Myths are Yeats’s means and his end: his myths of the history of imaginative community are myths about, and promoting, the availability and the sharing of myths. Yeats’s analyses are from the outset antipathetic to scientific rationalism, so his concern is less with such proof being unavailable as with making claims for alternative types of proof. Among these is occult experience, which is problematically subjective: it can only function as proof if it can be demonstrated

²⁶ Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth: Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: C. U. P., 1997), pp.9-38, p.17.

to be constituted by repeated and shared patterns, which are mythic patterns, and to be more widely available. Yeats's analyses, then, are curiously self-involved: they offer myths about mythopoeia.

Yeats's mode of literary history becomes a matter of tracing through history the imaginative capacity to escape history. Imaginative creations are seen as indices of changes in the phasal history of the imagination and of its capacity to escape time. The poet writing in the present seeks both to mark and to create a new phase. However, the predicted and ideal return of imaginative community and access to symbolism are associated with eternity, obscuring and perhaps obviating temporal priority and influence-anxiety in this anti-temporal aesthetic. Paradoxically, these formulations both rely on the literary history of Yeats's chosen tradition and seek to re-order and even de-historicise it. This is reflected in alternations between an ideal of new imaginative creation which seeks to revitalise an original communal imaginative life and one which would work within the limitations of audience and creative scope determined by an accepted belatedness. I will suggest that Yeats moves more towards the latter position in this period, but in much of *Ideas of Good and Evil*, he does not always choose between these alternatives, he alternates and combines them. In these formulations, some contemporary poetry both predicts and forms part of a new universal imaginative phase characterised by literal predictions of revelation, but it can also be seen as the work of initiates writing for initiates through a perspective which is much more sceptical about awaking latent imaginative community and in which revelation is a perpetual individual capacity and a metaphor. The elision between prediction and recommendation of communal imaginative change can fall apart again, if the communal part of it fails to take shape. This possibility seems to be at the heart of Yeats's increasing preoccupation with being in and out of phase.

Yeats's selection from, and of, forebears and his creative principles aspire to escape temporal limitation but rely on the creation of conceptions of history, though principally mythic conceptions: they are avowedly the requisite aesthetic stances of an inheritor. Indeed, in these essays the portions of eternity revealed by this poetic inheritor are the delineations of spiritual history: the inheritor cannot help but proceed by registering the capacity and the loss of imaginative influence, its dissociations and potential re-associations. Magical and mystical traditions

overlay literary ones, their inclusion justified by appeal to originary unities of all imaginative activity, and by their status as analogous alternative histories. Fissures, disinheritances, disparities and shifts, as between unwritten and written traditions, between poetry and music, or between scientific, political, journalistic and poetic language, punctuate this history. The ideal of the revelation of eternity and the failure to produce a new communal imaginative phase require Yeats to come to terms with time by developing his own forms of history: any new artistic interactions between time and eternity register and reorder the history of such interactions. All literary history, including Yeats's own work and his earlier personal beliefs are available to be reordered in successive creative developments; the relative freedom of selection and association attributed to the imaginative historian allays the potential for influence anxiety. A single absolute predicted reawakening of imaginative potential and an almost opportunistic readiness to use it as a way of imagining influence gives way in this period to more complex characterisations of social and literary phases in the past, present and future. The historical pattern which is cited repeatedly in these essays from original imaginative community, through dissociations, to a recreation, gives way to less optimistic cyclical movements and to rearrangements which accept difficulty, loss, instability and a need to come to terms with time in their treatments of influences. Enabling but imprecise appeals to the standards of eternity are replaced by idiosyncratic versions of history in which the recurrence of certain oppositions suggests the genesis of a cyclical model. Reeves and Gould note that Yeats's treatment of Joachimist historical patterns manifests his abandonment of linear history in favour of cycles.²⁷ At this stage one kind of cycle predominates, culminating in a new age which is, in terms of culture and of community, a return to the source; later and further repetitions accompany a failure of confidence in such a single restitution.

This shift cannot be dated or located at a definite point in Yeats's writings: the equivocations, contradictions, expansions and diminutions through these essays continue to employ complex negotiations through different and even incompatible principles. The revelation of the eternal or the loss of imaginative access to the

²⁷ Reeves and Gould, p.250.

eternal do not present single solutions to the poet's pursuit of an aesthetic programme, but they offer enabling possibilities for continuing development and for imagining creation. This complex use of ideas of time and of history is articulated in some sophisticated stylistic combinations. Prophecy, literary succession, racial history, biography, the temporal conditions of literary works and within them, linear and cyclical movements accumulate through and within essays which relate contemporary literature to assessments of eternal value, through anecdotes and descriptions of youthful ideals uncertainly modified by the passage of time, through outrageous rhetorical inclusiveness and through prose which by brevity or division into sections frustrates linear narrative progression. Several essays end in anticipation of revelation: this proves engaging and provocative in an isolated piece, but in the collection it is repeated, contained and modified by other essays. At this point, this modification and these modes of literary history do not quite become systematic, since Yeats is less concerned with inclusive system than with flexibility at this stage of his construction of traditions.

I will begin with a consideration of the pieces on Blake and on Shelley. Blake is the most significant single authority for Yeats in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, and the characteristic flourishes and provocations which Yeats develops in the prose style of the book are greatly indebted to his reading, quotation, misquotation and imitation of Blake. Blakean aphorisms and formulations adapted from Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* provide formulations which recur throughout. The essays on Blake and Shelley represent assured reconsiderations of Yeats's early influences, and placed either side of the essay on Shakespeare they are the principal readings of single major poets in the volume. Although we might expect with hindsight that these essays would represent an interest in these poets which Yeats would soon change, it is possible to see already in these pieces an assertion of authority to select from and to contain even these major models, an assertion which anticipates a readiness to see their limitations. In these essays, Yeats attempts to isolate those qualities in the poets which he can characterise as unaffected by the passage of time, as reaching towards lasting patterns, assertions and arrangements of symbols. This leads recurrently into evocations of eternal value, but the potentially facile terms of this evaluation are enriched by the assertions that the most persistently interesting aspects of Blake and Shelley not

only survive the passage of time, but take on a portion of immortality and exercise an active interchange between temporal and eternal concerns. The opening of “His Ruling Ideas”, the first part of “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry”, sets out some of these terms in a characteristically anecdotal manner:

When I was a boy in Dublin I was one of a group who rented a room in a mean street to discuss philosophy. My fellow students got more and more interested in certain modern schools of mystical belief, and I never found anybody to share my one unshakeable belief. I thought that whatever of philosophy has been made poetry is alone permanent, and that one should begin to arrange it in some regular order, rejecting nothing as the make-believe of the poets. (p.90; p.65)

The youthful belief is never contradicted, in spite of the suggestion of naive idealism, and the project of arranging permanence is endorsed. The young Yeats is also moved all the closer to the great poets by his separation from the “modern schools” of belief. Similarly, although the essays offer elements of historical context, Blake and Shelley are largely dissociated from rather than located in their periods: they become subjects for the arranging and associating efforts of the successor poet-critic. As well as praising his early models, Yeats qualifies and controls them, and seems to be discovering the possibilities of idiosyncratic historicism in the process of relating literary history to eternity, and in the isolation of previous poetry as perpetual resource. Much is rejected, even in the case of Shelley, but not because it is “make-believe”. Yeats celebrates heterodoxy, while stressing the limitations which heterodoxy may involve if it fails to gain recognition of its structures and symbols from its audience. While examining Blake’s and Shelley’s revisionist enterprises, Yeats isolates their liberating aspects for successors, but also seems to suggest the possibility that a heterodoxy which re-established imaginative communion could become orthodox. Blake and Shelley are rearranged into the sources of perpetually new inspirations, and exponents of perpetually timeless symbolism. Yeats’s mode of selection and discussion is not wholly adulatory: the temporal contortions also allow him to qualify his admiration while selecting. Blake offers modes for considering Shelley and vice versa: since both are represented as misunderstood in their time and in the later nineteenth century, they are all the more available for selective synthesis into a tradition recognised by their successor. If it is unstable as theory, alternately de-mystifying and re-mystifying Blake and Shelley, this mode is energetic and self-justifying as

practice. Blake and Shelley provide occasions for imaginative engagement and are manipulated to justify the selection of aspects from their work, even as their words are absorbed into the movement of Yeats's prose.

2. Blake

Most of the quotations and misquotations of Blake elsewhere in *Ideas of Good and Evil* are also repeated in the essays on Blake, and these essays represent a selective reading of Blake which Yeats found most applicable to other subjects. The essays on Blake demonstrate seminal Yeatsian manipulations of aphorisms concerning time, eternity, and art which are adapted elsewhere. The repetition of these formulations provides a reassuring structure of metaphors for the discussion and the pursuit of literary and cultural change. Blake offers a model of the visionary revisionist as combative and isolated, and Yeats recurrently attempts to place him into a new tradition, as if to declare that his ideas need no longer be isolating. This is a complex which recurs through the book: Yeats pursues isolated, even anti-social, vision and contemplation, but also hopes to reclaim a central social role and the support of a tradition for poets in the present. The crucial centrality of Blake ensures that Yeats takes no other literary tradition as given. His traditions are constructed through adapted Blakean terms which convert the treatment of any other author into a questioning of tradition, centrality and kinds of community, and set terms for oppositions between eternity and the failures and limitations of imagination within histories.

The essays on Blake's illustrations to the Divine Comedy were among the first essays in *Ideas of Good and Evil* to have been published previously. They had appeared in three sections in Nos. 3-5 of the *Savoy* in 1896.²⁸ The illustrations were not published in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, and two paragraphs referring to them were also excised, leaving a more general and theoretical account: the essays offered Yeats opportunities to widen consideration of vision, and to arrange Blake into an opposition to Dante which he, rather than the illustrations, can articulate. In Bornstein's useful phrase, Yeats learned the "dynamics of distortion" from Blake's correction of Dante.²⁹ In "The Tragic Generation", Yeats described the publication of illustrations with the essays as the subject of accusations of indecency, and for him the reaction to the publication of these essays came to represent an example of Philistinism: Blake's offences against moralistic conventions went through a

²⁸ In *Ideas of Good and Evil* Yeats misdates the essays 1897. They were slightly revised in early 1903 for the volume.

²⁹ "Yeats's Romantic Dante", p.76.

recurrence which Yeats encountered as a personal experience and later turned into a symbolic anecdote.³⁰ So not only was Blake misunderstood in his own time, he continued to be rejected in the 1890s, along with Beardsley, the *Savoy*, Symons and Yeats himself, in an artistic community defined by its rejection by the public. The first publication of the first essay in *Savoy* No.3, subtitled “His Opinions on Art”, presented Blake as “the first great *symboliste* of modern times, and the first of any time to preach the marriage of great art with symbol”.³¹ In *Ideas of Good and Evil*, this was modified to extend Blake’s relevance to a greater artistic range in a broader and imposing opening statement:

William Blake was the first writer of modern times to preach the marriage of all great art with symbol. There had been allegorists and teachers of allegory in plenty, but the symbolic imagination, or, as Blake preferred to call it, ‘vision,’ is not allegory, being ‘a representation of what actually exists really and unchangeably.’ [...] the one is a revelation, the other an amusement. (p.176; p.116)

Symbolism is instantly placed at the summit of a hierarchy, as a representation of ultimate reality. Yeats then declares that Blake’s idea of the “relations [...] between symbol and mind”, although not Yeats’s subject, would be comprehensible to “simple persons” and ascetics, but not to “the man of modern culture”: the contemporary world and the accumulation of culture of which conventional literary history is presumably a part are obstacles to the comprehension of eternity. Yeats uses Blake at the outset as an affront to the complacency of “modern culture” and to suggest who might constitute an ideal audience, for Yeats or for Blake. For Yeats, Blake offers a training in seeing beyond the temporal, but even this training assumes the exclusion of many readers and a restriction of audience which will not be founded on extent of learning or sophistication. Yeats’s own style here invites participation in its energy, and in this movement to throw off obstruction. Through association and accumulation it absorbs and delivers quotation, and seems to take on Blake’s confidence. Yeats also takes on Blake’s actual language, with and without direct quotation and attribution, as Blake’s work becomes part of Yeats’s own great memory, and the resulting critical style displays an energetic contempt for any readership which may not be receptive to it, implying that such readers are too hampered by “modern culture”. In registering the new clarity and explicitness

³⁰ *Autobiographies*, pp.323-4.

³¹ *Savoy* 3, (July 1896), 41-57, p.41.

of Blake's developed thought on art as displayed in "emphatic prose" (p.182; p.119), Yeats adopts similar emphasis. He retains enough critical distance to recognise that Blake's intensity resulted in limitations in his views, but approves this extremism, which becomes a kind of simplification through intensity. The strain of responding to and qualifying Blake's style while approving its energy shows at times, notably when Yeats recognises that Blake's concept of symbolism does not accommodate suggestive aspects of symbolism familiar to Yeats:

His praise of a severe art had been beyond price had his age rested a moment to listen, in the midst of its enthusiasm for Coreggio and the later Renaissance, for Bartolozzi and for Stothard; and yet in his visionary realism, and in his enthusiasm for what, after all, is perhaps the greatest art, and a necessary part of every picture that is art at all, he forgot how he who wraps the vision in lights and shadows, in iridescent or glowing colour, having in the midst of his labour many little visions of these secondary essences, until form be half lost in pattern, may compel the canvas or paper to become itself a symbol of some not indefinite because unsearchable essence; for is not the Bacchus and Ariadne of Titian a talisman as powerfully charged with intellectual virtue as though it were a jewel-studded door of the city seen on Patmos? (pp.185-186; p.121)³²

The rhetorical question attempts a Blakean force and breadth, while adding Yeats's authoritative selection of exemplary and revelatory art-objects: Yeats is already adapting Blake while considering his importance as a model for modes of adaptation, and can add categories of symbolism to Blake's by designating them as symbols of revelation.

It is significant that Yeats corrects Blake by over-reaching him rather than by emphasising exaggeration as a fault: the central qualities of Blake's influence here are those manifesting excess, provocation, and risks with technique. This is borne out by the succeeding summary of Blakean formulae as dismissing generalisation, moderation and the development by which "Englishmen are all intermeasurable with one another"(p.194; p.126). This accumulation of Blakean wisdom in describing Blake's development licenses a very Yeatsian account of the spiritual and artistic dynamics of inspiration, a claim for the artist-critic's ability to perceive the conditions which govern the development of art:

³² *Essays and Introductions* has "...Stothard. What matter if in his visionary realism...". The emendation, made for the 1924 edition, shortens and clarifies what had been an elusive sentence. It also turns the whole of that sentence into a complex rhetorical question. Lanham, p.353n. The

So when man's desire to rest from spiritual labour, and his thirst to fill his art with mere sensation and memory, seem upon the point of triumph, some miracle transforms them to a new inspiration; and here and there among the pictures born of sensation and memory is the murmuring of a new ritual, the glimmering of new talismans and symbols. (p.190; p.124)

The reassessment of art as generated by phasal change is an unsystematic application of an implied system of imaginative development. Blake's example, Yeats suggests, is only one of many in a recognisably phasal cultural history, but Blake also lends to his critic the terms which help to articulate that history.

Yeats freely adapts Blake to justify the perception of phases in an alternative artistic and spiritual history repeating its patterns across literary history. This allocation of ideas of value and of development specifically disrupts other standards of development, notably where Yeats moves on to a dichotomy about ideas of perfection while considering Blake's illustrations to Dante. Rejecting the view that Blake's "flaming imagination pierces through a cloudy and indecisive technique," Yeats offers a careful reassessment of technique equal to perfection:

The technique of Blake was imperfect, incomplete, as is the technique of well-nigh all artists who have striven to bring fires from remote summits; but where his imagination is perfect and complete, his technique has a like perfection, a like completeness. He strove to embody more subtle raptures, more elaborate intuitions than any before him; his imagination and technique are more broken and strained under a great burden than the imagination and technique of any other master. 'I am,' wrote Blake, 'like others, just equal in invention and execution.' (pp.195-6; p.127)

However, while reinforcing this interdependence of ideas and execution, Yeats immediately pulls the subject back to the developed but diminished phase of the present. Perfection and completion are only partial ideals without Promethean inspiration:

Living in a time when technique and imagination are continually perfect and complete, because they no longer strive to bring fire from heaven, we forget how imperfect and incomplete they were in even the greatest masters, in Botticelli, in Orcagna, and in Giotto. (pp.196-7; p.128)

So after quoting Blake on precision, Yeats demands allowance for incompleteness in works of genius: the superlative accommodates the dichotomy. To the "errors in the handiwork of exalted masters" he adds

division into shorter sentences is characteristic of the emendations made to *Ideas of Good and Evil*

the more phantastical errors in their lives; as Coleridge's opium cloud; as Villiers De L'Isle Adam's candidature for the throne of Greece; as Blake's anger against causes and purposes he but half understood; as the flickering madness an Eastern scripture would allow in august dreamers; for he who half lives in eternity endures a rending of the structures of the mind, a crucifixion of the intellectual body. (p.197; p.128)

This anticipates later Yeatsian accounts of the bizarre and tortured lives of poets, including his own contemporaries, as products of profane and sacred attempts to connect eternity and time, and the essay ends with this revision of standards, declaring that strict mundane and temporal analyses are inappropriate to inspired artists.

The second essay returns almost immediately to this concern with the possibility of a mode of criticism which can comprehend the interactions of eternity and time, and it does so through a Blakean opposition between Blake and Dante: "he was very certain that he and Dante represented spiritual states which face each other in eternal enmity." (p.197; p.128) The source of this enmity is Dante's philosophy, separable from his inspiration and redundant because simply a product of his age, but also "which Blake held for mortal, the enemy of immortal things, and which from the earliest times has sat in high places and ruled the world" (p.198), Christianity as a temporal force. The dichotomy is paradoxical if taken too literally, in that one part of the "eternal enmity" is mortal. The qualities which are set up in opposition to Christianity's decline into a temporal force are not limited by time and space, and form an ideal of an enabling poetic influence, part of what Yeats finds liberating in Blake:

Opposed to this was another philosophy, not made by men of action, drudges of time and space, but by Christ when wrapped in the divine essence, and by artists and poets, who are taught by the nature of their craft to sympathise with all living things, and who, the more pure and fragrant is their lamp, pass the further from all limitations, to come at last to forget good and evil in an absorbing vision of the happy and the unhappy. (pp.198-9; p.129)

Again, the ensuing paraphrase has so much momentum that Yeats seems to be fully and admiringly absorbed in Blake's pursuit of this absorbing vision. Through Blake, Yeats as historical critic becomes prophet. The debased Christianity Blake found in Swedenborg, Milton, Wordsworth and Reynolds, contrasted with

“unlimited forgiveness”, is drawing to a close, as observed by one who can perceive the spiritual movements of the world:

Its kingdom was bound to grow weaker so soon as life began to lose a little in crude passion and naive tumult, but Blake was the first to announce its successor, and he did this, as must needs be with revolutionists who have ‘the law’ for ‘mother,’ with a firm conviction that the things his opponents held white were indeed black, and that the things they held black, white; with a strong persuasion that all busy with government are men of darkness and ‘something other than human life’; one is reminded of Shelley, who was the next to take up the cry, though with a less abundant philosophic faculty, but still more of Nietzsche, whose thought flows always, though with an even more violent current, in the bed Blake's thought has worn. (pp.200-201; p.130)

Through *Ideas of Good and Evil* and in succeeding essays Yeats tends to look for qualities in other writers which can be related to eternity, and which can be dissociated from the restrictive philosophies of their times, and his consideration of Blake on Dante is a consideration of a similar process as performed by his crucial revisionist forebear. However, this dissociation from the corruptions of time takes shape alongside an approval of artists who identified changes in eras: it does not seek to be unconcerned with time, but rather to impose poetic identifications of time on to history. Blake is the crucial enabling model for this process, since with Blake Yeats can both display an example of one poet's reception of another and repeat a similar process on that poet. Blake's distribution of ideas between corrupt time and perpetually available eternal pattern allows Yeats to find a pattern in Blake which both comprehends eternity and registers change in time. Shelley is here a borderline case, his fault being a lack of “abundance”: it is not entirely clear what Yeats means by “abundance”, but the nature of his enthusiastic use of Blake here suggests that it may relate to aggressive exuberance of prose style. The introduction of Shelley and Nietzsche here is an addition to the first *Savoy* publication, in which Yeats had compared Blake's “stormy paradox” with “those French mystics who have taken upon their shoulders the overcoming of all existing things, and say their prayers to Lucifer, son of the morning, derided of priests and of kings”.³³ The alteration substitutes for one contemporary inversion of moral codes, one of Yeats's oldest and his newest enthusiasms in an unacknowledged

³³ *Savoy* 4, (August 1896), 25-40, p.26.

tradition of unrestricted independence of thought. Foster notes that Ellis had already made the connection between Blake and Nietzsche in his essay in the second issue of the *Savoy*, and Reeves and Gould examine Yeats's synthesis of Joachim, Blake and Nietzsche in these essays in detail.³⁴ I am principally interested here in the aspect of that synthesis which allows Yeats to historicise relations between art and life to produce myths of ideal eras, and to consider art and life in terms of their relations to time.

The notion of abundance runs through the succeeding contrast of the passing "kingdom of the Tree of Knowledge" and the incipient "kingdom of the Tree of Life". Again the dichotomy is initially attributed to Blake, but seems to be accepted and endorsed as a reappraisal of priority in the relations between life and art: "men who sought their food among the green leaves of the Tree of Life condemned none but the unimaginative and the idle, and those who forget that even love and death and old age are an imaginative art" (p.201; p.130). The passing of a phase offers a way of imagining a perpetual contrast, and gives confidence to the critic deciding to what poetry and criticism should be responsible. The phases also assume an original, and immanently recoverable, unity between art and life.

Describing Blake's synthesis of art and religion allows Yeats to offer three stanzas of "The Divine Image" as the demonstration of the Blakean symbol of God, and of art as a medium of and instruction to sympathy. The phrasing of Yeats's introduction is important: it privileges symbolism as a religious practice, while still involved in art. It also suggests that notions of divinity can only be realised and shared in art.

No worthy symbol of God existed but the inner world, the true humanity, to whose various aspects he gave many names, 'Jerusalem,' 'Liberty,' 'Eden,' 'The Divine Vision,' 'The Body of God,' 'The Human Form Divine,' 'The Divine Members,' and whose most intimate expression was art and poetry. (pp.206-7; p.133)

Yeats acknowledges that he is biased towards reading "by the light of Blake's paradoxical wisdom," (p.208; p.134) in these essays, explaining that he gives so much attention to Blake because he is so little understood soon becomes an endorsement of Blake's rejection of much of Dante's philosophy. The axis of time and eternity is invoked in a different permutation: now Blake's link with

³⁴ Foster, p.272; Reeves and Gould, pp.231-8.

eternity is seen to operate through permutations of time, but it still displays an appreciation of shifts and changes in eras while evoking brief and supreme periods of artificial civilisation. Blake's "paradoxical wisdom" is converted into Yeats's literary history, in which literature is extracted from the corruptions of historical limitation by liberation from temporal conventions:

Every philosophy has half its truth from times and generations; and to us one-half of the philosophy of Dante is less living than his poetry, while the truth Blake preached and sang and painted is the root of the cultivated life, of the fragile perfect blossom of the world born in ages of leisure and peace, and never yet to last more than a little season; the life those Phaeacians, who told Odysseus that they had set their hearts in nothing but in 'the dance and changes of raiment, and love and sleep,' lived before Poseidon heaped a mountain above them; the lives of all who, having eaten of the Tree of Life, love, more than did the barbarous ages when none had time to live, 'the minute particulars of life,' the little fragments of space and time, which are wholly flooded by beautiful emotion because they are so little they are hardly of time and space at all. 'Every space smaller than a globule of man's blood,' he wrote, 'opens into an eternity of which this vegetable earth is but a shadow'. And again, 'Every time less than a pulsation of an artery is equal' in its tenor and value 'to six thousand years, for in this period the poet's work is done, and all the great events of time start forth, and are conceived: in such a period, within a moment, a pulsation of the artery.' (p.208-9; pp.134-5)

Yeats's literary history here takes advantage of the ambiguity of a tradition constructed from revisionist gestures, in that this becomes a tradition resistant to the corruptions of times. The mode of quotation piles up the references to time by association, and so stresses the freedom of movement of the imagination to the confusion of rational measurement and order. Though apparently a creation of particular eras, this imaginative and abundant life is also perpetually accessible in art.

The remainder of the essay incorporates a long quotation from *Jerusalem* including a sequence of rhetorical questions which returns all spirituality to "mental studies and performances", and works up momentum to deliver a manifesto against limitation of the imagination. Yeats's interpretation and succeeding quotations stress that ideas of time and conventional notions of good and evil are symbols which, used freely, can offer ways of imagining the restorative imagination. Restoration is the key process: the prophecy of a new age of life and art, which Reeves and Gould show to be partly Joachimist in inspiration, is really a

prophecy of a return effected within the imagination.³⁵ Religion and histories of religion are subordinated to and interpreted through imaginative creativity:

This cultivated life, which seems to us so artificial a thing, is really, according to them [the Prophetic Books], the laborious re-discovery of the golden age, of the primeval simplicity, of the simple world in which Christ taught and lived, and its lawlessness is the lawlessness of Him 'who being all virtue, acted from impulse and not from rules,'

And his seventy disciples sent
Against religion and government.³⁶

The historical Christ was indeed no more than the supreme symbol of the artistic imagination, in which, with every passion wrought to perfect beauty by art and poetry, we shall live, when the body has passed away for the last time; but before that hour man must labour through many lives and deaths.(pp.212-213; p.137)

As Reeves and Gould suggest, the latter repetitive pattern "indicates clearly his own beliefs (rather than those of Blake) in which what we have called his symbolical Joachimism is indeed no more than symbolical."³⁷ Yeats wraps histories, analyses, gospels and predictions into one symbolical mode.

This reliance on the imagination as an authority for the relegation and re-interpretation of periods of time relies on the discriminating ability of the poet-critic and on an extreme revaluation of what constitutes symbolic art:

Mere sympathy for living things is not enough because we must learn to separate their 'infected' from their eternal, their satanic from their divine part; and this can only be done by desiring always beauty, the one mask through which can be seen the unveiled eyes of eternity. We must then be artists in all things, and understand that love and old age and death are first among the arts. (p.216; p.139)

Separating infected from eternal forms a pattern for Yeats's literary histories. The highest art, by this criterion, cannot be a criticism of life. The priorities of art and life are rearranged, and only in the recreated Golden Age may life again become equivalent to art.³⁸ Yeats's invocations of this complex, in this period and in his later work, may be his ideal version of the broader relocation of aesthetics which Michael Bell sees as recurrent in the "great works of modernism": "the mythopoeic

³⁵ Reeves and Gould, pp.202-71.

³⁶ Yeats added the initial "And" here, so that Blake follows through the momentum of Yeats's sentence. Yeats also quotes these lines from "The Everlasting Gospel", correctly, to conclude his manifesto in "What is Popular Poetry?" (p.15), where the antinomian yet religious imagination is again defined against conventional misapprehensions about cultivation and simplicity.

³⁷ Reeves and Gould, p.237.

³⁸ A similar equivalence occurs in the Spenser introduction (p.xxii), in an elegiac description of a lost condition, though there Yeats does not relate it to a primary human condition, but casts it as a temporary achievement.

metaphysic disappears into the texture of the living experience, or of the text, achieving very often a naturalness which has effectively disguised the metaphysical implication of its aesthetic forms.”³⁹

Reeves and Gould note the various precedents for an ideal equivalence of life and art, notably Wilde, and their analysis also points to the problems posed by the employment of it as a standard: it tends to resolve itself into instants rather than new ages, or remains only restricted as an ideal of life “to some sort of *tableau vivant*.”⁴⁰ In Yeats’s reading, Blake offers a more energetic restoration of such an equivalence, and indeed it seems to be Blake’s energy in reaching for this equivalence, rather than the state of perfection itself, which most appeals to Yeats.

The essay continues to galvanise its oppositions to produce extreme formulations until the end, and closes in a remarkable synthesis of Blakean quotation with the perpetual apocalypse and judgment which recurs through Yeats’s writing in the period:

True art is expressive and symbolic, and makes every form, every sound, every colour, every gesture, a signature of some unanalyzable imaginative essence. False art is not expressive, but mimetic, not from experience but from observation, and is the mother of all evil, persuading us to save our bodies alive at no matter what cost of rapine and fraud.. True art is the flame of the last day, which begins for every man, when he is first moved by beauty, and which seeks to burn all things until they ‘become infinite and holy.’ (p.217; p.140)

Reeves and Gould note that Yeats here conflates a quotation from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* with one from “A Vision of the Last Judgment”, and that this passage has strong affinities with Aherne’s extravagant claims in “The Tables of the Law”.⁴¹ This summary of Blake is crucial to the aesthetic terms which Yeats propounds through *Ideas of Good and Evil* because of its association of symbolism with immortality, mimetic art with temporality.

The retention of the subtitles “His Opinions upon Art”, “His Opinions on Dante” and “The Illustrations of Dante” and of the divisions between the three *Savoy* pieces contributes to the effectiveness of Yeats’s quotation and aphoristic

³⁹ Bell, p.24.

⁴⁰ “For Wilde, ‘those who live in marble or on painted panel, know of life but a single exquisite instant, eternal indeed in its beauty, but limited to one note of passion or one mood of calm.’ For Yeats such a perfection, however limited, offered a precise equivalence to Aquinas’s definition of eternity, and Joachim’s conception of the *via contemplativa* of the third *status*.” Reeves and Gould, p.231.

emphasis: after each extrovert conclusion the same subjects are re-approached from a new angle. Read as one piece, “William Blake and his illustrations to the *Divine Comedy*” gains from the play with approaches and interruptions of narrative, and the aphoristic, energetic but disjointed prose style within essays is reflected in the construction of the volume. The last of these essays, “The Illustrations of Dante”, sets out to connect what has gone before back to the illustrations, but Blake is still used primarily as a resource for judgment. From contradicting John Addington Symonds, and dismissing the claims of “noisy and demagogic art” Yeats demonstrates why illustration is such a productive subject in this case.⁴² By considering it as a mode of imaginative response, he distinguishes between “ordinary intelligences” and those extraordinary intelligences, here Blake and Botticelli, in whose illustration “the magical ritual has called up extraordinary shapes, the magical light glimmered upon a world, different from the Dantesque world of our own intelligence in its ordinary and daily moods, upon a difficult and distinguished world.” (p.220). Indeed, this kind of response becomes the model for all reading, although extreme in its creative results:

as if Dante’s world were more than a mass of symbols of colour and form and sound which put on humanity, when they arouse some mind to an intense and romantic life that is not theirs; as if it was not one’s own sorrows and angers and regrets and terrors and hopes that awaken to condemnation or repentance while Dante treads his eternal pilgrimage; as if any poet or painter or musician could be other than an enchanter calling with a persuasive or compelling ritual, creatures, noble or ignoble, divine or daemonic, covered with scales or in shining raiment, that he never imagined, out of the bottomless deeps of imaginations he never foresaw; as if the noblest achievement of art was not when the artist enfolds himself in darkness, while he casts over his readers a light as of a wild and terrible dawn. (pp.219-220; p.141)

Dante is locked in an “eternal pilgrimage” in his work, but his readers create their own experiences of that work. These “creatures” are aroused because poetry allows its readers to make their own experiences from art which touches the depths of imagination common to all. This association of art and magic is one of many in *Ideas of Good and Evil*. Writing and reading on one side, evocation and reception on the other, are comparable modes within which influence operates. This response

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p.236; pp.234-8.

to influence may encompass both sympathy and revolt, and the conclusion to a comparison of Blake with other illustrators stresses these elements:

It was a profound understanding of all creatures and things, a profound sympathy with passionate and lost souls, made possible in their extreme intensity by his revolt against corporeal law, and corporeal reason, which made Blake the one perfect fit illustrator for the 'Inferno' and the 'Purgatorio': in the serene and rapturous emptiness of Dante's Paradise he would find no symbols but a few abstract emblems, and he had no love for the abstract, while with the drapery and the gestures of Beatrice and Virgil, he would have prospered less than Botticelli or even Clovio. (p.225; pp.144-5)⁴³

Symbols are again the essential material for Blakean response and revision.

"William Blake and the Imagination", which precedes the pieces on Blake and Dante in *Ideas of Good and Evil* although written after them, also negotiates through ideas of time and of eternity, and makes even more extrovert rhetorical gestures in its emulative admiration.⁴⁴ This essay is, if anything, even more concerned with a mode of literary history in that it defines works of art in terms of their use of traditions, and their success or failure in becoming parts of traditions. However, while Blake provides him with authority for eccentric historicism, Yeats is also engaged in loosening some associations and creating others, making his concept of symbolism more arbitrary, and invoking authority to rearrange authority. In this reading, Blake is always already a precursor, out of place in his time, anticipating later developments and completions, unable to find satisfaction in his age and so creating new possibilities. Indeed Blake may not only be like those described in "Magic" "who are at war with their time", he seems to be at war with time (p.66; p.51). But Yeats does provide Blake with a tradition, and as he unfurls this portrayal of Blake's function in spiritual and literary history and gives this

⁴² In *Savoy*, No.5, Aug 1896, p.31, the phrase "noisy and demagogic art" was followed by "an art as heavy as with the rank breath of the mob". Yeats excised this for *Ideas of Good and Evil*, perhaps as too crudely provocative.

⁴³ In 1924 Yeats added a note to the conclusion of the essay which acknowledges one of his principal difficulties in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, the problem of expounding complex aesthetic positions opposed to abstraction without falling into abstraction in the course of argument: "Some seven or eight years ago I asked my friend Mr. Ezra Pound to point out everything in the language of my poems that he thought an abstraction, and I learned from him how much further the movement against abstraction had gone than my generation thought possible. Now, in reading these essays, I am ashamed when I come upon such words as 'corporeal reason,' 'corporeal law,' and think how I must have wasted the keenness of my youthful senses. I would like to believe that there was no help for it, that we were compelled to protect ourselves by such means against people and things we should never have heard of." *Essays and Introductions* p.145.

⁴⁴ First published in *The Academy*, 19th June 1897.

displaced Blake his delayed endorsement, he claims his own authoritative understanding of the terms and the movements characteristic of such history. The assured generalisation contains Blake and the reader in associations founded on an assumption of common experience of the phasal development of all aspects of life:

There have been men who loved the future like a mistress, and the future mixed her breath into their breath and shook her hair about them, and hid them from the understanding of their times. William Blake was one of these men, and if he spoke confusedly and obscurely it was because he spoke things for whose speaking he could find no models in the world about him. He announced the religion of art, of which no man dreamed in the world about him; and he understood it more perfectly than the thousands of subtle spirits who have received its baptism in the world about us, because, in the beginning of important things - in the beginning of love, in the beginning of the day, in the beginning of any work, there is a moment when we understand more perfectly than we understand again until all is finished. (p.168; p.111)

The characterisation of the phase which began with Blake and encompasses the present is accompanied by an elucidation of the mental activity made possible or necessary by a phase and a point in a phase. Elaborately evoked, this must be taken on trust.⁴⁵

Rather provocatively, Yeats then sets up another analysis of literary history, and this is a literary history because it historicises the relations of literature to life and to belief. While in Blake's time "educated people believed that they amused themselves with books of imagination, but that they 'made their souls' by listening to sermons and by doing or not doing certain things." Whereas in the present

We are agreed that we 'make our souls' out of some one of the great poets of ancient times, or out of Shelley or Wordsworth, or Goethe or Balzac, or Flaubert, or Count Tolstoy, in the books he wrote before he became a prophet and fell into a lesser order, or out of Mr. Whistler's pictures, while we amuse ourselves, or, at best, make a poor sort of soul, by listening to sermons or by doing or not doing certain things. We write of great writers, even of writers whose beauty would once have seemed an unholy beauty, with rapt sentences like those our fathers kept for the beatitudes and mysteries of the Church; and no matter what we believe with our lips, we believe with our hearts that beautiful things, as Browning said in his one prose essay that was not in verse, have 'lain burningly on the Divine hand,' and that when time

⁴⁵ Yeats's introduction to Spenser employs an account of the conditions attendant upon the beginning of a phase which is similar to this in its authoritative suggestion of a general pattern, but actually dissimilar in the nature of the pattern itself. (*Essay and Introductions*, p.357).

has begun to wither, the Divine hand will fall heavily on bad taste and vulgarity. (pp.169-70; pp.111-2)

Even the prophet is less than the artist, but Blake is allowed to be a kind of prophet too, in his anticipation of a realignment of art with belief. Pursuing the adoption of religion, Yeats asserts that Blake's preaching against the Philistine was "as the preaching of the Middle Ages against the Saracen": as well as suggesting that Blake's time has come, Yeats overlays his account with alternative ways of seeing history through parallels and juxtapositions. His summary of Blake's extrapolation of Boehme's beliefs makes an understanding of the imaginative arts into revelation, and imaginative sympathy into the forgiveness of sin, and then returns to eternity as the measure of aesthetic stances:

but imagination divides us from mortality by the immortality of beauty, and binds us to each other by opening the secret doors of all hearts. [...] Passions, because most living, are most holy - and this was a scandalous paradox in his time - and man shall enter eternity borne upon their wings. (p.171; pp.112-3)

While developing this association of imagination and eternity in the work of a predecessor, Yeats also points out rather surreptitiously the relativism in contemporary assessments of ideas of good and evil, of social mores, and the statures of religion and of art. The paradox may still be scandalous to some, and Yeats challenges moralistic criticism. In terms which will become more familiar in other essays in this book, Yeats makes Blake "more simply a poet than any poet of his time" and also more so than the "poets of a better time", Tennyson and Wordsworth, because he is concerned less with temporal utility and more with abundant creation:

As though the spray of an inexhaustible fountain of beauty was blown into our faces, and not merely when one reads the Songs of Innocence, or the lyrics he wished to call 'Ideas of Good and Evil', but when one reads those 'Prophetic Books' in which he spoke confusedly and obscurely because he spoke of things for whose speaking he could find no models in the world about him. He was a symbolist who had to invent his symbols; and his counties of England, with their correspondence to tribes of Israel, and his mountains and rivers, with their correspondence to parts of a man's body, are arbitrary as some of the symbolism in the *Axël* of the symbolist Villiers De L'Isle Adam is arbitrary, while they mix incongruous things as *Axël* does not. He was a man crying out for a mythology, and trying to make one because he could not find one to his hand. (pp.173-4; pp.113-4)⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Yeats uses the image of the self-delighting and non-utilitarian fountain in several essays.

The association of ideas shifts swiftly from one aspect of Blake to another. For once, customised spiritual and literary history are turned against Blake, allowing a return for Yeats to a culture in which traditional mythology is still available: that of modern Ireland. Blake's isolation in his own age was a limitation, even though his recognition of the limitations of temporal as contrasted with eternal perspectives is endorsed. It produced a rootless mythology, one all the more available for adaptation by a successor. Interestingly Dante is subject to relative revaluation in this essay: here his system is allowed to have provided a rooted mythology comprehensible to his audience. Bornstein identifies Yeats's analysis here as touching on a modern and personal problem, the conflict between subjection to established system and isolation in private mythology.⁴⁷ By contrast with Dante, Wagner and those with access to Irish mythology, Blake was writing without tradition: Yeats makes him part of one, in retrospect, which he as successor can develop. However the assertion that Blake is the more obscure for not using traditional symbols in his revisionist enterprise suggests that for all his concern with tradition, Yeats sees such symbols as ideally available for recurrent reapplication: symbols recur in art and as the substance of tradition they provide stability and train sympathy, but their connotations may be in flux. Tradition proceeds through unfixed and recurrently restructured associations, rather like the argument of Yeats's essay. Yeats appears to want to have it both ways, to negotiate between subordination and innovation, and the vague evocation of a wealth of symbols open for reapplication allows him to do this. He ends by identifying the potential for retaining tradition but escaping restrictive authority in using myth and folklore rather than established religion.

Yeats also finds occasion to mention "the lyrics he wished to call 'Ideas of Good and Evil'" (p.173; p.113). In his notes to *Poems of William Blake* he had commented on the phrase as

possibly a first and rejected attempt towards a title for the poems afterwards called the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, but probably a first thought for a title of the *Songs of Experience* alone,

⁴⁷ Bornstein traces Yeats's various reassessments of Dante through his career partly in terms of Yeats's changing assessment of the necessity for a poet to have a system, pp.73-96.

‘experience’ and eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil being one and the same in Blake's philosophy.⁴⁸ So Yeats identifies the title of his collection of essays as a Blakean title which was not used by its original author. Within his edition of the poems, Yeats used the phrase for a section including poems from letters and various other sources. His note continues:

The title ‘Ideas of Good and Evil’ was probably soon forgotten, but, having at any rate his partial sanction, may well serve us better than such unmeaning and uncomely titles as ‘Later Poems’ or ‘Miscellaneous Poems’. The editor follows the example of Gilchrist's book in including under the title poems from other sources than the MS. book.

The provocative and relativistic discussion of changing concepts of the relation of morals to art is supported by the assertion of inherited authority in the use of the phrase as a volume title. The apparent echo of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* is fitting to much of the book, in that what sounds like Nietzsche is actually an adaptation and reapplication of Blake. Yeats wrote to Quinn about Nietzsche: “In some ways he completes or rather modernises the doctrine that I learned from Blake”, and we might see the desire to modernise and complete Blake as Yeats's own in this book: before Yeats observed that Nietzsche completed Blake he was attempting to do so himself.⁴⁹ Baudelaire is another possible presence in the choice of a title, as is Symons, whose volume of poetry *Images of Good and Evil* was published in 1899.⁵⁰ The provocative use of moral terms involves an appropriate degree of synthesis.

These essays on Blake are physically and thematically at the centre of *Ideas of Good and Evil*, and Blake's name recurs through the book as an enabling authority for the creation of idiosyncratic literary history and as a resource for aphoristic quotation. Yeats's adaptation of Blake tends to produce a prose style of strong stances while enabling loose associations. A comparison with Yeats's other introductions to Blake suggests the importance of emphatic aphorism rather than

⁴⁸ *Poems of William Blake* 2nd, rev. ed. (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1905), p.267; *Prefaces and Introductions*, p.207.

⁴⁹ *Letters* III, P.313.

⁵⁰ Arthur Symons, *Images of Good and Evil* (London: Heinemann, 1899). The volume of poems demonstrates some of the interests which Symons shared with Yeats at the time, particularly the “In Ireland” sequence of poems (pp.145-50), and the “Airs for the Lute” dedicated to Mme Elodie Dolmetsch (pp.114-8).

broad system in the essays in *Ideas of Good and Evil*.⁵¹ Clearly, this is to an extent a function of the purpose of those other pieces as introductions to a difficult author: they are at pains to stress coherence of system rather than revivifying energy. Even their more bizarre and speculative attempts at contextualisation, notably the suggestion that Blake was Irish and the idyllic account of his marriage, are presented in a relatively muted style. There is no comparable attempt to take on an extrovert Blakean prose style, although the quotation of resonant phrases in the introduction to the poems suggests its potential. In the essays in *Ideas of Good and Evil* Yeats finds some elements of system in Blake and implies others in his own analyses, while leaving his symbolical schemes open, recurrently evoking the fascination of discovery and the possibility of further revelation, and drawing Blake into his own modes of analysis.

⁵¹ "Preface" to *The Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic and Critical* in 3 vols, ed. by Edwin J. Ellis and W. B. Yeats (London: Quaritch, 1893), Introduction, *Poems of William Blake. Prefaces and Introductions*: pp.74-78; 79-101.

3. Shelley

Yeats also gives sustained attention in *Ideas of Good and Evil* to another major early influence, Shelley. Like Blake, although to a lesser extent, Shelley is quoted and invoked elsewhere in the volume. Other similarities in treatment are immediately obvious: quotations are accumulated and compressed and the essay proceeds assertively through association of ideas and images in their various occurrences in Shelley's work. At some points Yeats presents a rather Blakean Shelley in the accumulated affirmations, at others contrasts between the two.

"The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" is the culmination of many years of thought about Shelley, and as well as homage to a master, it represents a development in the ordering and negotiation of such a major forebear.⁵² As George Bornstein points out, the essay unites "the quest for beauty which he had found in the subjectivists with the analysis of imagery he had learned in refuting Arnold", but it exercises the privilege of retaining and inserting divisions so that the direction of the essay remains quite overtly in Yeats's control, with little sense of a conventional assessment of Shelley's achievements: Shelley is specifically made coherent by associations detected by his successor.⁵³ In his concern to refute Matthew Arnold and Edward Dowden, Yeats claims a coherence for Shelley's philosophy and symbolism by relating them to traditions of poetic and visionary symbolism which he claims to be still relevant in the present day. The division of the essay into "His Ruling Ideas" and "His Ruling Symbols" initiates the rather dislocated movement through the subject: though apparently a means of ordering, the division opens the way for free re-arrangements. The recurrences of analogous ideas, then of symbols, are connected by association, and largely abstracted from their particular functions. The lack of chronological or generic consideration of Shelley's oeuvre leaves an account of both Shelley's poetry and his intellectual context as stabilised and as comprehensible only through their structuring symbols rather than particularly political, historical or biographical approaches: Yeats implies that structures of symbols are the matter of significant literary history. The opening which I quoted above, which recalls Yeats's youthful and continuing

⁵² The first part of the essay was published in the *Dome*, June 1900. The magazine had ceased publication before the second part could be published.

⁵³ George Bornstein, *Yeats and Shelley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p.41.

belief in the permanence of poetry at the expense of all other modes of philosophy, suggests enduring reverence, but may also contain the germ of a perpetual need for re-arrangement: “whatever of philosophy has been made poetry is alone permanent, and that one should begin to arrange it in some regular order” (p.90; p.65). Yeats’s further experience has only confirmed and broadened the conviction that “the imagination has some way of lighting on the truth that the reason has not.”

When considering Blake, Yeats adopted many of his subject’s positions but tended to reduce system to some simple, if powerful, repeated motifs and to explain the mythological machinery as an inevitable by-product of originality. At other points in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, systems of thought in the work of his models tend to be rejected or partially rejected as Yeats describes Blake rejecting that of Dante. In the case of Shelley, though, the philosophy is seen as essential; the mythology is subject to some criticism when too separated from “traditional forms” and inclined to “rootless phantasy” (p.106; p.74), but, crucially, it can generally achieve coherence and can express itself in recurrent symbols which have analogues in literary history and in the “great memory” (p.113; p.79). Patterns are attributed to Shelley’s thought and symbolism, which are then related to wider transhistorical patterns, of which he may or may not have been aware. The two sections are parallel and complementary: one establishing philosophical coherence across the poems, the other sustaining this affirmation of coherence with the identification of enriching and perpetually enriched visual symbols. Neither too removed from his age and from common symbols like Blake, nor too subject to the dogmas of an era like Dante, Shakespeare and, in the later introduction, Spenser, Shelley becomes a model for the reliance on timeless symbols, but his conscious understanding of his own symbols is left in a degree of doubt. The persistence rather than the reordering and reinterpretation of symbols is given greater value here in comparison with the Blake essays. Shelley becomes partly a medium for the operation of the great memory, his involvement with its symbols is detected and rearranged by his successor.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Yeats had noted faults in Shelley and related those faults to an insufficient grasp of folklore and “true types and symbols”, in an essay for the *Speaker* in 1893: *Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth* ed. by Robert Welch (London: Penguin, 1993), pp.86-90, p.89; *Uncollected Prose I 1886-1896* ed. by John P. Frayne (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp.283-8, p.287. In the present essay, Yeats approves Shelley’s symbols rather more, but insists that they require his own arrangement.

Personal anecdote has a particularly sharp point to it in this essay. Yeats's youthful belief in *Prometheus Unbound* as a sacred book is endorsed, as he recalls discussing it with "a learned scholar", undoubtedly Edward Dowden. Yeats affirms Shelley's imaginative range, and in doing so also rejects criticism and literary history which assumes too close a dependence of literature on politics.⁵⁵

I remember going to a learned scholar to ask about its deep meanings, which I felt more than understood, and his telling me that it was Godwin's *Political Justice* put into rhyme, and that Shelley was a crude revolutionist, and believed that the overturning of kings and priests would regenerate mankind. I quoted the lines which tell how the halcyons ceased to prey on fish, and how poisonous leaves became good for food, to show that he foresaw more than any political regeneration, but was too timid to push the argument. (p.91; p.65-6)

However, in Yeats's later analysis it is allowed that this range in Shelley's thought seems heterogeneous and obscure unless the reader has registered the associations between passages and "has discovered the system of belief that lay behind them", a system which he, Yeats, will relate to an order of symbolism.

Quoting Mary Shelley, Yeats concedes some obscurity in his master, but proceeds to select in such a way as to affirm and extend the application of Shelley's philosophy:

From these scattered fragments and observations, and from many passages read in their light, one soon comes to understand that his liberty was so much more than the liberty of *Political Justice* that it was one with Intellectual Beauty, and that the regeneration he foresaw was so much more than the regeneration many political dreamers have foreseen, that it could not come in its perfection till the hours bore 'Time to his grave in eternity'.⁵⁶ (p.93; pp.66-7)

The assertion of the unity and coherence of Shelley's philosophy also involves a displacement of it out of time. This idealisation may detract from Shelley's political impact, but it accords with the patterning of ideals by the standard of eternity which Yeats is offering as the only real escape from opposing forces. Yeats

⁵⁵ Perkins states that Dowden's mode of historical criticism was moving against the prevailing tide of literary history in the late nineteenth century, by continuing to stress political contexts. In his considerations of Romantic poets he also reacted against earlier critics by suggesting that those poets had all reacted in different ways to political events. Perkins, pp.102-3, 109-10. Yeats's treatment of the individual writer within events should be considered in the context of a variety of styles of literary history.

⁵⁶ In *Prometheus Unbound*, Time is borne "to his tomb in eternity". IV, 14. Not all of Yeats's misquotations are so simple. Yeats's quotations from *A Defence of Poetry* include the statement: "Poets have been challenged to resign the civic crown to reasoners and merchants" (p.94). In Shelley this reads "reasoners and mechanists". Yeats's socio-aesthetic programme seems to have informed his reading at a profound level. Lanham, p.258n.

follows this with a barrage of quotations from *A Defence of Poetry*, culminating with an attack on contemporary English utilitarianism, but founded on Shelley's account of a poetic privilege to transcend temporal restriction through prophetic vision (p.94) and linking Shelley to Blake. An insistence on Shelley's belief in the power of imaginative sympathy as a union of beauty, liberty and love - achieved through a rapid selection of passages associated together - then threatens to reduce Shelley to a rather ineffectual idealist professing a pseudo-Christian humility, and plays down concern with contemporary political reform. However, it does convey an enthusiastic immersion in Shelley's work, and the synthesis of Yeats's enthusiasms seems to be the principle of order. Yeats finds in *Adonais* the association of poetic quality with immortality which he pursues through these essays: the power to pronounce on eternal truths establishes a corresponding capacity partially to transcend death and to achieve a "portion of the eternal which must glow through time and change unquenchably the same": (p.102; p.72). Quoting Mary Shelley's notes, Yeats fastens on the belief

'that those who rise above the ordinary nature of man, fade from before our imperfect organs; they remain in their "love, beauty, and delight," in a world congenial to them, and we, clogged by error, ignorance and strife," see them not till we are fitted by purification and improvement to their higher state.' (p.103-4; p.73)

However, while seeming to suggest that Shelley's work raised him to such a state, Yeats authoritatively links this belief to an eternal memory, "that memory of nature the visionaries claim for the foundation of their knowledge", and suggests that through a kind of cultural anti-materialism he can place Shelley in a tradition of which Shelley knew nothing. It is through the attention of readers that poetic fictions are revitalised, in a conviction which may recall Blake's "firm perswasion" and certainly recalls the conviction of tradition attributed to the young Yeats at the beginning of the essay that poetic forms are perpetually available mental acts.

Though undoubtedly a homage to Shelley, the essay has moved to reconfirm its author's rather than Shelley's ability to re-affirm tradition by identifying eternal resources in writing:

The passage where Queen Mab awakes 'all knowledge of the past,' and the good and evil 'events of old and wondrous times,' was no more doubtless than a part of the machinery of the poem, but all the machineries of poetry are parts of the convictions of antiquity, and

readily become again convictions in minds that dwell upon them in a spirit of intense idealism. (p.105; p.74)

Yeats lights upon a poetic vision of history, and interprets it through the claim that poetry is significant history, asserting that potential future history may be found in poetic images and realised again through belief.

Shelley's employment of a range of mythological ministering spirits exposes him to the charge of having "an air of rootless phantasy" (p.106; p.74), but even these, because they "change continually, as they do in the visions of the mystics everywhere and of the common people of Ireland," display rather ambiguously both Shelley's self-sufficient creativity and an access to "supersensual power." To Shelley, such spirits and visions had reality, and were more than "metaphorical and picturesque." Again Yeats allows himself the role of providing another context of past folk belief and a coming age of a Blakean understanding of beauty as authority to establish Shelley's convictions as more than nervous and eccentric subjectivity. He lists Shelley's images of good and evil in a vivid procession with absorbed enthusiasm, though without textual accuracy.⁵⁷ The procession which Yeats has accumulated from Shelleyan quotations is permitted the status of vision. Shelley "had reawakened in himself the age of faith," but Yeats can predict the terms in which this may become a general reawakening. Yeats completes the first part with a synthesis of personal experience of poetry and place with apocalypse and a favourite image from Blake. Shelley is rooted anew in the imaginative possessions of rural Ireland. Yeats's own re-reading of Shelley introduces another imaginative re-awakening. The capacity for belief in an end to time unites disparate figures across time, and prepares for a growth in such belief:

I have re-read his *Prometheus Unbound* for the first time for many years, in the woods of Drim-na-Rod, among the Echte hills, and sometimes I have looked towards Slieve-nan-Orr, where the country people say the last battle of the world shall be fought till the third day, when a priest shall lift a chalice, and the thousand years of peace begin. And I think this mysterious song utters a faith as simple and as ancient as the faith of those country people, in a form suited to a new age, that will understand, with Blake, that the holy spirit is an 'intellectual fountain,' and that the kinds and degrees of beauty are the images of its authority. (pp.110-1; pp.77-8)

⁵⁷ Yeats's lack of precision is such that Lanham is unable to determine which edition of Shelley Yeats used for the essay. Lanham, p.253n.

In the next section Yeats mentions the real caves and towers from which Shelley made the symbols; here he relocates Shelley's symbols in his own places, present and permanent.

The second section, "His Ruling Symbols" proceeds with the same kind of de-contextualised listing of associated elements. Each list of occurrences of a symbol is succeeded by more general comments on symbolism which accumulate, without overt arrangement into any sustained critical statement. The concentration on recurrence of symbols offers a more structured version of Shelley - structured by Yeats's arrangement - than the catalogues of images in the first section. In effect symbols, rather than "ideas" are the structural principles of "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry". Images relating to covert languages and signs suggest that Shelley was fascinated by "the traditions of magic and of the magical philosophy" and "their doctrine of symbols or signatures,". The signs written on sand remained one of Yeats's most important images of difficult wisdom, requiring interpretation.⁵⁸ Here we might detect disappointment in the comment "I do not find anything to show that he gave it any deep study" (p.112; p.78), but again Shelley's lack is Yeats's gain in authority: as an initiate as well as a poetic successor he can detect Shelley's increasingly deliberate use of symbols. Reasoning, through what he claims to be quite common mystical experience, that Shelley had a notion of "some great memory", Yeats makes another connection between poetry and eternity by equating symbol and soul:

Shelley understood this, as is proved by what he says of the eternity of beautiful things and of the influence of the dead, but whether he understood that the great memory is also a dwelling-house of symbols, of images that are living souls, I cannot tell. (pp.113-4; p.79)

This understanding is casually inserted as if a matter of common belief. Shelley's capacity for mystical experience, now considered as unusually extreme, more so than he realised himself, then connects with this speculation in confirmation of the synthesis of ideas of immortality. The parallelism actually reasons Shelley into a pseudo-divine creativity:

and he must have expected to receive thoughts and images from beyond his own mind, just in so far as that mind transcended its preoccupation with particular time and place, for he believed inspiration a kind of death; and he could hardly have helped perceiving

⁵⁸ "The Gift of Harun-al-Rashid", *VPoems* p.468.

that an image that has transcended particular time and place becomes a symbol, passes beyond death, as it were, and becomes a living soul. (pp.114-5; p.80)

This is an extraordinary aspiration for poetry. Now the critic's and successor's aim seems to be to detect Shelley's potential place in a tradition which professes the identity of eternal symbols with immortal souls. This is a tradition defined by its peculiar notion of what persists, that is, of what constitutes the matter of ongoing traditions.

The rather facile biographical speculation that Shelley's journey to the continent may have prompted his initial use of rivers and caves as symbols leads into another list of occurrences in Shelley's poetry, this time of symbols. These are then related to Plato and Porphyry, and through quotation and interpretation of Porphyry to occult and intellectual inspiration, suggesting that Shelley's own images of inspiration covertly express a debt of inspiration to tradition. Yeats's own style refuses to acknowledge the shifts in his frame of reference, it assumes an access and an ease in establishing associations. Noting parallels between Shelley's thought and Porphyry, Yeats recalls that "Water is his great symbol of existence, and he continually meditates over its mysterious source." Appropriately enough, the essay then flows on through a selection of occurrences of flowing. Yeats's own associative power of reference allows fluctuation in the connotations of symbolism, in a striking diminution from free association to objectification:

It [the cave] may mean any enclosed life, as when it is the dwelling-place of Asia and Prometheus, or when it is 'the still cave of poetry,' and it may have all meanings at once, or it may have as little meaning as some ancient religious symbol enwoven from the habit of centuries with the patterns of a carpet or a tapestry. (pp.125-6; p.86)

The listing of symbols moves from rivers and caves to "half-ruined towers", the contrary symbols to caves, and ones which would continue to fascinate Yeats.

As in the earlier stages of this section, this list is then followed by the next stage of the discussion of symbolism in general, here as a means of ordering and of avoiding over-determined and self-enclosed order:

It is only by ancient symbols, by symbols that have numberless meanings beside the one or two the writer lays an emphasis upon, or the half-score he knows of, that any highly subjective art can escape from the barrenness and shallowness of a too conscious arrangement, into the abundance and depth of nature. The poet of essences and pure ideas must seek in the half-lights that glimmer from symbol to symbol

as if to the ends of the earth, all that the epic and dramatic poet finds of mystery and shadow in the accidental circumstance of life. (pp.127-8; p.87)

As a genre, then, lyric poetry or at least one mode of lyric poetry functions in dialogue with the history of symbols and the imaginative communities which they have created. Any reading community may thus become linked to previous ones.

At the climax of this parade of Shelley's symbolism is the star, considered as the recurrent form of Intellectual Beauty "which was to Shelley's mind the central power of the world;" (p.130; p.89), and corresponding to the account of this inclusive ideal in the first section. Through "The Triumph of Life", it is then associated with the "cup full of oblivion and love" (p.130; p.89), and from thence back to Porphyry. Yeats refrains from attributing these associations to Shelley's intentions, rather "his poetry becomes the richer, the more emotional, and loses something of its appearance of idle phantasy when I remember that these are ancient symbols, and still come to visionaries in their dreams." (p.131; pp.89-90). This personal re-allocation to a tradition brings in Usheen, "a Galway tale" and the vision of "a friend of mine". Such visions and Shelley's poetry have been "thrown outward once again from that great memory, which is still the mother of the Muses, though men no longer believe in it." However the final remarkable speculative contrast of Shelley, Blake and Keats stresses the role of subjective temperament in the selection of symbols. Keats embodied Intellectual Beauty in the moon, Blake in the sun, but Shelley in "the Star of infinite desire." (p.140; p.94). This simplification foregrounds the importance to Yeats of Blake as a model for affirmation and Shelley for desire, leaving Keats's symbolism as essentially decorative and soporific, a "love of embodied things, of precision of form and colouring, of emotions made sleepy by the flesh," and response to life which was glad but with reservations (pp.133, 140; pp.91, 94-5).⁵⁹ The contrast returns to Shelley and tests these stances as proto-religious ones: in "ancient times" these preferences would have been marked by differences in forms of worship:

I think too that as he knelt before an altar, where a thin flame burnt in a lamp made of green agate, a single vision would have come to him again and again, a vision of a boat drifting down a broad river between

⁵⁹ The second reference to Keats was excised for the 1914 and later editions, perhaps reflecting an increased sophistication in Yeats's view of Keats, and particularly of Keats's gladness; Lanham, p.301n.

high hills where there were caves and towers, and following the light of one Star; and that voices would have told him how there is for every man some one scene, some one adventure, some one picture that is the image of his secret life, for wisdom first speaks in images, and that this one image, if he would but brood over it his life long, would lead his soul, disentangled from unmeaning circumstance and the ebb and flow of the world, into that far household, where the undying gods await all whose souls have become simple as flame, whose bodies have become quiet as an agate lamp.

But he was born in a day when the old wisdom had vanished and was content merely to write verses, and often with little thought of more than verses. (p.140-141; p.94-5)

As eccentric as any of the speculative historicism and anti-historicism in the volume, this conclusion destabilises application, interpretation and resonance of poetic symbols: a poet's use of symbolism may revitalise ancient knowledge with conviction, but may also be a matter of temperament and biographical accident, and may be blind to the tradition it continues. Religious practice is again invoked to provide a speculative analogy for a definition of an individual imagination. Yeats finally brings a degree of scepticism to bear on the associative procedure which has directed the essay, and the range of poetic reference and relevance is conditioned by the possibility and the loss of belief. This assessment of "a day when the old wisdom had vanished" curtails the subjective achievement of the earlier section, in which "Shelley had reawakened in himself the age of faith" (p.110; p.77). Much of *Ideas of Good and Evil* seems to be arranged between the possibility of such a reawakening and a recognition that such an age will not literally dawn and can only be an individual symbolic achievement, but the operation of these two parameters in the Shelley and Blake essays, alternately associating and limiting poetic images, provide a means of negotiating Yeats's inheritance which a firm conviction of one or the other would not. The last reconciliation is perhaps the time when Time will be borne to his grave in eternity, but it is a time perpetually about to arrive, and never quite now. Yeats has taken from Shelley, and from Browning on Shelley, the concept of the poet as interpreter of eternity to the temporal world, expanded it, and re-applied it through spiritual historicism to his model. Browning had cast himself as a different kind of poet from his subject, registering changes in literary development in a literary history of alternation between subjective and objective, a contrast which would appeal increasingly to Yeats in a much more ambitious historical mode. Yeats takes up

Browning's notions of the subjective poet and attaches them to great poets in all phases, but he also refashioned phasal movement with a similar intention of defining and contributing to the coming phase.⁶⁰ The resulting complex of perspectives threatens to become incoherent, but by establishing the instability of imaginative influence and communion it permits autonomy to the successor who perpetually rearranges the relations between the poet, imaginative traditions, time and eternity.

⁶⁰ Robert Browning "Essay on Shelley", *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, ed. by Ian Jack, Rowena Fowler and Margaret Smith (Oxford: O. U. P., 1991), IV, 421-442, p.426: "Not what man sees, but what God sees - the *Ideas* of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand - it is towards these that he struggles. [...] He is rather a seer, accordingly, than a fashioner."

4. The Imminent Apocalypse, New Age or Imaginative Dispersal

Before examining the essays directly on Ireland and literature, on symbolism and on audience I will look briefly at the early essays in *Ideas of Good and Evil* which approach imaginative and spiritual histories from less obviously literary or critical perspectives: “The Moods”, “The Body of the Father Christian Rosencrux”, “*The Return of Ulysses*”, “The Autumn of the Body”, “The Galway Plains” and “Emotion of Multitude”. These essays are concerned with the contemporary condition of the arts, but approach it in determinedly heterodox terms. They draw upon similar concerns to those through which Yeats treated Blake and Shelley: transhistorical imagination and communal memory, recurrent symbols and the access to these as an aesthetic ideal moderated by changes in the history of the imagination, but I treat them as a group because they take for their subjects the forms of imaginative change which the other essays either bring in as modes of analysis, or to drive arguments to an ideal conclusion. Blake is frequently invoked as an authority for the rhetorical identification of this history, which includes critiques of Yeats’s immediate predecessors among nineteenth-century poets developed from some unlikely directions, but in these pieces imaginative history is the principal theme. Towards the end of *Ideas of Good and Evil* a succession of these essays accumulates brief rhetorical exercises, including symbols of symbolism and imaginative appeals to the capacity of the imagination, which invite and provoke the reader to conceive of imaginative revelation and the reassertion of belief. Reasoned persuasion is rarely attempted, but there is considerable stylistic variation in the use of motifs of spiritual change and communal imagination. The beliefs professed and promoted in elaborate sentences are characterised by an inclusiveness which justifies them as compatible and available to be arranged into unity, but they continue to equivocate between the evocations of the great memory as open to endless and autonomous re-ordering and as eternally ordered by a divine artist. Extrovert assertions and disingenuously sedate assumptions mask the division between literal and metaphorical revelation: the reader is challenged to believe in an imaginative communion which can be realised by belief.

“The Moods” is the earliest essay in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, first published in the *Bookman* in August 1895 as the first paragraph of an essay on contemporary

Irish prose writers, including Standish James O'Grady and several folklorists. The essay was one of a series of articles on Irish national literature. The essay has a parallel in the poem of the same name, first published in August 1893, which also imagines time and nature as subordinate to other powers which are dimly perceived by the poet.⁶¹ The essay is no more precise, but displays confidence in these moods as the source of artistic creation. The lack of precise definition of what is meant by these moods is enabling and synthetic: they are supernatural imaginative powers, ideas, aesthetic movements, modes of communion with a supernatural artist, but also embodiments of national feeling. Like those on Blake and Shelley this essay concerns the negotiation between eternity and the temporally bound artist perpetually attempting to reveal that eternity, and places the medium of that negotiation in the perception of "a mood, or a community of moods". Blake is included as an enabling authority for the remarkable lack of restraint or precision in Yeats's exposition. Its overbearing association links "the Ruler of All, the gods of ancient days still dwelling on Mount Olympus, the angels of more modern days ascending and descending upon their shining ladder", as the source and authority of these moods, which may become ideas of good and evil. The assured stance and the brevity of the piece allow none of the "argument, theory, erudition, observation", which it condemns as "illusions of our visible passing life, who must be made to serve the moods, or we have no part in eternity." The conclusion is an extreme version of Yeats's subjectivist position, in that although it speaks of external, transcendent realms and forces, it places ultimate reliance on the artist as individual interpreter of those forces. Its rejection of restraints suggests that the poet could use the kind of heterogeneous argument and observation which Yeats frequently derided in Victorian poetry, but only as subordinate to a higher perception which rejects criticism of life for vision and is evidently Blakean:

Everything that can be seen, touched, measured, explained, understood, argued over, is to the imaginative artist nothing more than a means, for he belongs to the invisible life, and delivers its ever new and ever ancient revelation. We hear much of his need for the restraints of reason, but the only restraint he can obey is the mysterious instinct that has made him an artist, and that teaches him to discover immortal moods in mortal desires, an undecaying hope in our trivial ambitions, a divine love in sexual passion. (p.306-7; p.195)

⁶¹ *VPoems*, p.142.

“The Moods” is followed by “The Body of the Father Christian Rosencrux”, which was the first paragraph of an essay on contemporary Irish poets published in September 1895.⁶² In it, Yeats approaches contemporary aesthetics through a studiedly bizarre image:

The followers of the Father Christian Rosencrux, says the old tradition, wrapped his imperishable body in noble raiment and laid it under the house of their order, in a tomb containing the symbols of all things in heaven and earth, and in the waters under the earth, and set about him inextinguishable magical lamps, which burnt on generation after generation, until other students of the order came upon the tomb by chance. It seems to me that the imagination has had no very different history during the last two hundred years, but has been laid in a great tomb of criticism, and had set over it inextinguishable magical lamps of wisdom and romance, and has been altogether so nobly housed and apparelled that we have forgotten that its wizard lips are closed, or but opened for the complaining of some melancholy and ghostly voice. (p.308-9; p.196)

Yeats’s image of the imagination is the central figure in a symbolic system recognisable to initiates, and rediscovered by initiates. Although he relates this complex image to the collective imagination, this also suggests that his perception is a privileged one, and that imaginative rebirth is the responsibility of initiates and involves the rediscovery of a symbolic system. Reeves and Gould state that there is

little to indicate that the Rosicrucians read Joachim’s works. One concept only - that of an order dedicated to the secret of the coming age - can perhaps be traced back to Joachim himself since, [...] the legacy of the ‘spiritual men’ foretold by Joachim was passed down through various prophetic leaders claiming such a role for their orders.⁶³

As I will show through this section, the synthesis of various notions of spiritual and artistic leadership, in which Blake and Shelley are included, and the prophecy of a new age initiated by them, are central to Yeats’s ideas about artistic development in these essays, but there is also some ambiguity over whether these figures must always remain heterodox, or will ever become an accepted priesthood.

Lanham states that the Christian Rosencrux legend was used by MacGregor Mathers in a Golden Dawn initiation ceremony, “a symbolic crucifixion and resurrection”.⁶⁴ Yeats reapplies for a new purpose and to a new audience a ritual reapplication of a legend which was itself a re-working of the central image of

⁶² In the *Bookman*.

⁶³ Reeves and Gould, p.26.

⁶⁴ Lanham, p.488n.

Christianity into a symbolic exemplary biography. In using this Yeats points to the availability of religious motifs for reapplication in new forms, while suggesting the potential for heterodox tradition to re-invigorate more orthodox and popular belief. The revision of an ancient symbol, first for initiates and then for a wider public fulfils the phasal movement of restriction followed by expansion of belief which recurs throughout *Ideas of Good and Evil*. This studiously elliptical opening then turns into an account of the decline and forthcoming revival in imaginative poetry. Decline and revival are considered as indices of the general degree of understanding of the spiritual functions of art. The time scale is sweeping, but the argument is not an isolated one for Yeats, and concentrates on nineteenth-century poetry. The failure of imagination is a failure to emulate the ancients and the Elizabethans, who portrayed “great beings who made the people of this world seem but shadows, and great passions which made our loves and hatreds appear but ephemeral and trivial phantasies”. Instead modern poetry has become reflective: “for the persons and passions in our poems are mainly reflections our mirror has caught from older poems or from the life about us”. The new awakening as perceived by this prophetic spiritual historian occupies the rest of the piece in one overriding predictive sentence, opening with the conviction of the imminence of “an age of imagination, of emotion, of moods, of revelation,” and then immediately converting this from a prediction to an aesthetic statement, against Arnold, that “art is a revelation, and not a criticism”. Revelation is in contrast to the debasing preoccupation with summing up “our time”, subordination to the ephemeral concerns of the age. At the close, as at the beginning, art is made mysterious, a non-rational emanation from the elect:

and the life of the artist is in the old saying, ‘The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the spirit.’ (p.310-1; p.197)⁶⁵

In a Shelleyan formulation, prophecy is finally converted into an aesthetic statement which denies that artistic creation is susceptible to rational and critical prediction. Art becomes a revelation perpetually waiting to happen. The “old saying”, quoted precisely from John 3.8 (*Authorised Version*) but not attributed,

⁶⁵ Reeves and Gould note that Lionel Johnson quoted the same lines in an 1898 article “Sacred and Mystical Poetry”, p.242.

becomes symbolic of what it describes: an articulation of spiritual movement from an undefined source in the communal memory.

Something like this still small spiritual breath dominates the more muted prophetic mode of the succeeding essay, "*The Return of Ulysses*", in which the contrast of temporal and atemporal concerns recurs as a contrast of sensationalist, perpetually "obsolete taste" with "a taste that cannot become obsolete".⁶⁶ The subject is modern dramatic poetry, and in some respects this essay is close to "What is Popular Poetry?" and "The Theatre" in its practical concerns, but the ideal of recreating a former age of poetic imagination also places it with these predictive essays. The aesthetic ideal, again concentrated on an elite, is "to illustrate the reveries of a wisdom which shall be as much a part of the daily life of the wise as a face or hands at rest". Here, though, the anticipated revelation is a realisation and a sharing of poetry to be effected by theatrical performance:

Some day the few among us, who care for poetry more than any temporal thing, and who believe that its delights cannot be perfect when we read it alone in our rooms and long for one to share its delights, but that they might be perfect in the theatre, when we share them friend with friend, lover with beloved, will persuade a few idealists to seek out the lost art of speaking, and seek out ourselves the lost art, that is perhaps nearest of all arts to eternity, the subtle art of listening. (p.313-4; p.199)

Tenses collapse with the fusion of definition of ideal with prediction of it, of possibility with prophecy. Bridges's *The Return of Ulysses* apparently anticipates such dramatic speech, evoking an excitement distinct from the melodramatic nervous excitement known to popular criticism, an "unearthly excitement which has wisdom for fruit, and is of like kind with the ecstasy of the seers, an altar flame, unshaken by the winds of the world, and burning every moment with whiter and purer brilliance." This contrast with debased modern art is followed by a contrast with Shakespeare. Though less than clear, this seems to suggest the adaptation of art to the needs of different periods of personal and of collective mental history:

The poet who writes best in the Shakespearian manner is a poet with a circumstantial and instinctive mind, who delights to speak with strange voices and to see his mind in the mirror of Nature; while Mr. Bridges, like most of us to-day, has a lyrical and meditative mind, and

⁶⁶ *The Bookman*, June 1897.

delights to speak with his own voice and to see Nature in the mirror of his mind [...] Had Mr. Bridges been a true Shakespearian, the pomp and glory of the world would have drowned that subtle voice that speaks amid our heterogeneous lives of a life lived in obedience to a lonely and distinguished ideal. (pp.316-7; pp.200-1)

The second section returns to the familiar exclusion of “heterogeneous knowledge and irrelevant analysis” from a poetry whose ritual resembles “the great ritual of Nature”, which is “copied from the same eternal model”. Again, the posited historical condition has been lost in the assertion of eternal pattern, but the realisation of spoken performance leads away from community to lonely ideals and ecstasies in lyrics rather than plays. Community is not yet as crucial an issue here as it is in the later essays on speaking poetry, and in the total perspective the poet becomes a gifted priest, interpreting God:

The more a poet rids his verses of heterogeneous knowledge and irrelevant analysis, and purifies his mind with elaborate art, the more does the little ritual of his resemble the great ritual of Nature, and become mysterious and inscrutable. He becomes, as all the great mystics have believed, a vessel of the creative power of God; and whether he be a great poet or a small poet, we can praise the poems, which but seem to be his, with the extremity of praise that we give this great ritual which is but copied from the same eternal model. (p.318; p.201-2)

Here the poet does not so much see beyond Nature, but rather becomes equal to it. Describing Nature in terms of “great ritual” effectively interprets it as constituted from perpetual ordering, rather than change and flux. This interpretation allows the poet to meet Nature halfway, in that the ordering of art has a correspondence in the external world.

This redefinition of the modern poetic condition continues in “The Autumn of the Body”, that essay with which Yeats found himself lacking sympathy relatively soon and which is placed before “The Moods”.⁶⁷ It defines the spirit of the age as epitomised by esoteric poetry, and its expectations of the future are of the collective resurgence of belief in a pseudo-religious artistic revelation. One of Yeats’s most energetic and self-indulgent pieces of aesthetic prophecy, it suffers particularly badly from the attempt to reconcile poetry of “words and types and metaphors that draw one’s imagination as far as possible from modern life and thought” with the anticipated communal “crowning crisis of the world,” in a

⁶⁷ First published in the *Daily Express*, 3rd December 1898, as “The Autumn of the Flesh”.

rejection of materialism. The essay originally formed part of Yeats's dispute with John Eglington, and the extremity of some of its ideas seems to derive from a determination to claim authority in opposition to notions of art as responding to modernity in a representational way. In rejecting these ideas, Yeats has to admit the esoteric qualities of some poetry but also to force them to take on broad, and, more importantly, contemporary, relevance. However, literature of suggestion and private ritual is made to fore-shadow a change in general imaginative era only by an effort of will.

Literature has become "spiritual and unemphatic", but also concerned with a desire for apocalypse: in these symptoms Yeats foresees more lyric poetry, but then, rather unaccountably, a resurgence of epic, and the strain shows. The summaries of artistic history are all the more outrageous presented in slow, meditative prose. Yeats's lack of sympathy with the essay may have been a product of its failure to argue through its predictions. It opens with a vague assertion of spiritual powers:

Our thoughts and emotions are often but spray flung up from hidden tides that follow a moon no eye can see. (p.296; p.189)

Then autobiographical anecdote presents examples of this, as Yeats recalls his rejection of picturesque and declamatory in favour of spiritual and unemphatic literature. In this recollection personal revelation anticipates and is confirmed by communal spiritual phase: later he has come to realise that his personal preference corresponded to a pan-European rejection of externality and of scientific and political thought in writing. *Axël* is the pre-eminent example, for in its depiction of "persons from whom has fallen all even of personal characteristic except a thirst for that hour when all things shall pass away like a cloud, and a pride like that of the Magi following their star over many mountains". In England, the attempt to absorb other contemporary discourses into poetry, which apparently covers Swinburne and early Shelley as well as Tennyson and Browning, is being replaced by "a new poetry, which is always contracting its limits". Tracing "the most condensed of lyric forms" and a "rhythm too delicate for any but an almost bodily emotion" to Bridges, Yeats describes this sub-tradition as a "procession". Poetry as austere ritual produces a ceremonial literary history, involved in repeating "over and over the most ancient notes of poetry". Although this appears initially to be

specifically about Bridges, Yeats has returned to circular literary history. Like many of his contemporaries, Yeats experimented with different ideas and definitions of “decadence”, and his evasion of a definition is a provocative assertion of spiritual movement above contemporary and temporal literary dispute:

I see, indeed, in the arts of every country those faint lights and faint colours and faint outlines and faint energies which many call the ‘decadence,’ and which I, because I believe that the arts lie dreaming of things to come, prefer to call the autumn of the body. (p.300; p.191)

While it converts looking back into looking forward, this seasonal image suggests that the history of all art is circular and repetitive, and it could even imply a potential for recurrence and entrapment.⁶⁸ This characterisation of a phase is supported by a growing belief in telepathy, clairvoyance and “the coming among us of the dead”: Yeats has moved from decadence to seance through a perceived association without registering stylistically the shift in subjects.⁶⁹ This muted prose style embodies the meditative rejection of categorical limitations. The attribution of prophecy to the arts is also an adaptation. As Rupin Desai noted, Yeats’s belief in the visionary prophecies of art is couched in terms borrowed from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 107: “the prophetic soul / Of the wide world dreaming on things to come.”⁷⁰

A poetic history then traces the growing preoccupation with things and with the labour of life through the Kalevala, Homer, Virgil, Dante and Shakespeare. Interestingly, Dante is almost excepted, for making his dialectic serve his “laborious ecstasy”, but has to be included to keep the pattern. Goethe, Wordsworth and Browning have taken the tendency further, by abandoning “the right to consider all things in the world as a dictionary of types and symbols”. Desai describes this essay as “an extraordinary blueprint for *A Vision*, because of its description of the progressively violent “impingement of the external world on

⁶⁸ Yeats continued to reinterpret decadence to very different effects: “When I think of the moment before revelation I think of Salome [...] and wonder if what seems to us decadence was not in reality the exultation of the muscular flesh and of civilization perfectly achieved.” *A Critical Edition of W B Yeats’s A Vision* (1925) ed. by George Mills Harper and Walter K Hood (London: Macmillan, 1978), p.185.

⁶⁹ Yeats’s interest in correlations between so many different kinds of belief in this period is documented in *Explorations*, pp.30-1, and was perhaps another reaction to the troubled history of the Golden Dawn and his loss of confidence in it.

⁷⁰ Rupin W. Desai, *Yeats’s Shakespeare* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971), p.71.

the artist's private vision".⁷¹ However, at this stage Yeats turns with more optimism to the restitution, in the turn of a cycle, of a mode of reading the world symbolically. The rearrangement of priorities which allows the world to be seen as a kind of art places rather more hope in prophetic art than can be found in the systematic threat to significance in the later, repetitious cyclical model.

If this summary of European poetry seems absurdly brief and over-reaching, the succeeding account of human activity is even more so, enveloping everything in its weary analysis of weariness:

Painting, music, science, politics, and even religion, because they have felt a growing belief that we know nothing but the fading and flowering of the world, have changed in numberless elaborate ways. Man has wooed and won the world, and has fallen weary, and not, I think, for a time, but with a weariness that will not end until the last autumn, when the stars shall be blown away like withered leaves. (p.302; pp.192-3)

The necessary return to spiritual sources and resources can only be undertaken through a new imaginative selectivity and sensitivity, and Yeats returns to the terms of heterodox and mysterious process. This next era begins to sound like another formulation of the subjectivism Yeats constructed from Hallam on Tennyson, from Shelley, and from Browning on Shelley, but presumably the need to fuse this movement with millennial notions of change in the late nineteenth century prevents the admission of its origins in this case:

The arts are, I believe, about to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of priests, and to lead us back upon our journey by filling our thoughts with the essences of things, and not with things. We are about to substitute once more the distillation of alchemy for the analyses of chemistry and for some other sciences; and certain of us are looking everywhere for the perfect alembic that no silver or golden drop may escape. (p.303; p.193)

Through the anti-rational alchemy necessitated by this stage of literary history the sensitive subjective poet's perception of divine essences issues in symbolism. Quoting Symonds quoting Mallarmé, Yeats stresses the replacement of common subject matter with a new linguistic form of community:

...desiring to substitute for the old lyric afflatus or the enthusiastic personal direction of the phrase words 'that take light from mutual reflection, like an actual trail of fire over precious stones,' and 'to

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p.54.

make an entire word hitherto unknown to the language' 'out of many vocables.' (p.304; p.193)⁷²

The surprising assertion is the scope allowed to symbolism: although Yeats recognises Symons's description of "a poetry of essences, separated one from another in little and intense poems", he is prepared to predict a return to more ambitious epic structures, and this confidence rests on a conviction that this "entire word" may interpret an over-arching imaginative structure, may be "the signature or symbol of a mood of the divine imagination".

I think that we will learn again how to describe at great length an old man wandering among enchanted islands, his return home at last, his slow-gathering vengeance, a flitting shape of a goddess, and a flight of arrows, and yet to make all of these so different things 'take light by mutual reflection, like an actual trail of fire over precious stones,' and become 'an entire word,' the signature or symbol of a mood of the divine imagination as imponderable as 'the horror of the forest or the silent thunder in the leaves.' (p.304-5; p.194)

Where Symons responded to the needs of the present, Yeats predicts the resurrection of a previous stage of literary history. This act of faith is supported by Yeats's concern to see symbolism in a procession, and by his persistent rearrangement of the work of other poets. It is not clear that such reordering will actually enable the creation of epic. However, the elements of epic related here are not only in *The Odyssey* and *The Return of Ulysses*, but also in *The Wanderings of Oisín*.⁷³ Prediction of recurrence may also be an advertisement for a prior achievement.

The last essays which I will include in this group are "The Galway Plains" and "Emotion of Multitude". These two later essays are more concerned than the apocalyptic essays with synthesis of national myth and folklore as a national and modern necessity, and with community as an achievement, rather than just a latency to be awoken. They are close in theme to "What is Popular Poetry?", "Speaking to the Psalter" and "Ireland and the Arts", but I discuss them here as later adaptations of the more vague hopes and beliefs in the essays considered above. In contrast, although they display some indulgence in expression, they

⁷² As Lanham notes, Symons first published these readings of Mallarmé in the *Fortnightly Review* November 1898, pp.677-85 and the article formed a chapter in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. He also shows that Yeats's succeeding comments evade the implications of Symons's further comments, that there was "no long poem ever written; the finest poem in the world being but a series of short poems linked together by prose." Lanham, p.483n.

⁷³ Lanham, p.483n.

elucidate aesthetic positions which have become more troubled by the contingencies of the modern world. In these pieces, potential imaginative reawakening is threatened by social dispersal. They were the last pieces in *Ideas of Good and Evil* to be written. "The Galway Plains" was first published in March 1903, as a review of Lady Gregory's *Poets and Dreamers*.⁷⁴ Although it adapts aspects of the concept of a communal imagination which has recurred in these other essays, and may seem simplistic and even retrogressive as a result, it introduces potential failure rather than anticipated reunification. It begins by stressing the relations of folklore and myth to real places, and relates that the activities of the Sidhe are recounted as present events by "country people". Folk memory is presented as inclusive, adaptable and even voracious, absorbing the laments of fugitives after the battle of Aughrim and placing Christ and saints in local tales. The particular emphasis is on tragedy and loss:

I do not think these country imaginations have changed much for centuries, for they are still busy with those two themes of the ancient Irish poets, the sternness of battle and the sadness of parting and death. The emotion that in other countries has made many love songs has here been given, in a long wooing, to danger, that ghostly bride. It is not a difference in the substance of things that the lamentations that were sung after battles are now sung for men who have died upon the gallows.

The emotion has become not less, but more noble, by the change, for the man who goes to his death with the thought -

‘It is with the people I was,

It is not with the law that I was,’

has behind him generations of poetry and poetical life. (pp.335-6; pp.212-3)

The community is "bound together by imaginative possessions," but these are dominated by the imaginative celebration of loss. This kind of permanence is a relatively conventional use of the chronotope of an unchanging community, but it is expressly the permanence of an aesthetic mood. The rest of the essay is concerned with artistic taste as determined by a people rather than by a school. The argument is circular: taste and people rely on each other:

One could still, if one had the genius, and had been born to Irish, write for these people plays and poems like those of Greece. Does not the greatest poetry always require a people to listen to it? England or any other country which takes its tune from the great cities and gets its

⁷⁴ Under the title "Poets and Dreamers" in the *New Liberal Review*.

taste from schools and not from old custom, may have a mob, but it cannot have a people. In England there are a few groups of men and women who have good taste, whether in cookery or in books; and the great multitudes but copy them or their copiers. The poet must always prefer the community where the perfected minds express the people, to a community that is vainly seeking to copy the perfected minds. To have even perfectly the thoughts that can be weighed, the knowledge that can be got from books, the precision that can be learned at school, to belong to any aristocracy, is to be a little pool that will soon dry up. A people alone are a great river; and that is why I am persuaded that where a people has died, a nation is about to die. (pp.337-8; pp.213-4)

In this formulation the communal memory involves potential problems of audience. Threats to the ideal of a communal imagination are acknowledged, and there is no mention of the privileges or isolation of the subjective poet except in the conditions of a nation after imaginative failure. These threats follow the emphasis on tragic passions in the communal memory, and could be seen to anticipate the tragic failure of imaginative community in modernity. Although Ireland is described as retaining communal memory and imagination, the essay ends on this portentous note, rather than with the anticipation of revelation.

In “Emotion of Multitude” the theatre is the arena for a lapse of imaginative community.⁷⁵ Yeats’s dramatic theory here centres on “emotion of multitude”, which he finds lacking in modern drama. Emotion of multitude proves to be a matter of dramatic structure: it is a kind of community of figures, and through them of myths, within a play which creates a resonance for the community which is the audience. The common imaginative possessions which are myths reverse conventional relations to watch the presentation of a new work of art:

The Greek drama has got the emotion of multitude from its chorus, which called up famous sorrows, long-leagured Troy, much-enduring Odysseus, and all the gods and heroes to witness, as it were, some well ordered fable, some action separated but for this from all but itself. (p.339; p.215)

In Shakespeare, this emotion is created by a sub-plot copying the main plot, “and very commonly the sub-plot is the main plot working itself out in more ordinary men and women, and so doubly calling up before us the image of multitude”. Here art is a mirror and a mode of social cohesion. The modern drama of Ibsen and Maeterlinck is allowed to have produced emotion of multitude from a different source, by offering “vague symbols that set the mind wandering from idea to idea,

emotion to emotion". Although it lacks the procession and cohesion, it awakens the mind to move between symbols. Yeats's final rhetorical flourish, itself using vague symbolism and demanding simplicity, hints at the necessity for an art which is both simple and suggestive, calling up ancient tradition. This passage concludes *Ideas of Good and Evil*:

Indeed all the great Masters have understood, that there cannot be great art without the little limited life of the fable, which is always the better the simpler it is, and the rich, far-wandering, many-imaged life of the half-seen world beyond it. There are some who understand that the simple unmysterious things living as in a clear noon-light are of the nature of the sun, and that vague many-imaged things have in them the strength of the moon. Did not the Egyptian carve it on emerald that all living things have the sun for father and the moon for mother, and has it not been said that a man of genius takes the most after his mother?(p.341; p.216)

Imaginative community continues to be available through art, and although it is achieved in a new way, it relies on a version of ancient practice, the suggestion of a wealth of imaginative possessions. Hermes Trismegistus, a presence elsewhere in the book, links this doctrine to the distant past and to contemporary occultists. The volume ends on this assertion of continuation, but in a passage which is challengingly obscure in its rhetorical combination of simple, ancient and occult images. Art retains mystery in its difficult community with the past, and this suggestive but wilfully elliptical statement rather than an anticipation of a new ease of imaginative creation and reception, stands as Yeats's last word in the book. The rhetorical process of association moves from "great art" to fable, to simplicity, to mystery, to the knowledge a few initiates have of mystery, which then becomes the true influence on "all living things". This mysterious knowledge of the potential influences on the world is examined in rather more sophisticated detail in "Magic".

⁷⁵ First published in the *All Ireland Review*, edited by Standish James O'Grady, April 1903.

5. "Magic"

The most sustained and inventive account of communal memory and imagination in *Ideas of Good and Evil* is in "Magic". Placed between "Speaking to the Psalter" and "The Happiest of the Poets", it proclaims a freedom from the restraints of literary criticism, but is not irrelevant to that: it offers its heresies as acts of imaginative communion. The great memory is again a licence for association across subjects, and for the potential eradication of any anxiety from or obstruction to influence. The essay links across time like the imagination it describes through its compilation of memories and associations. "Magic" also pursues the difficult aim of describing a subject to readers who may be assumed to be hostile to, or at least suspicious of, its principles. The interchange between magic and the creative arts allows Yeats to discuss poetic creativity with wonder, and to discuss magic as incorporated in rather than isolated from concerns which a literary public could share. George Mills Harper compares this essay with "Is the Order of R.R. and A.C. to remain a Magical Order?", a pamphlet which Yeats wrote in an attempt to justify his position during the upheavals in the Golden Dawn: "they are companion pieces, one written for the Second Order alone, the other for the public."⁷⁶ The pamphlet assumes a certain degree of knowledge with its readers, although there were different degrees of status between members of the order and Yeats was concerned with maintaining such distinctions while calling for a common purpose. In adapting to a different public, though, the essay in *Ideas of Good and Evil* operates over a more flexible range of positions: it half-shows and then hides particular beliefs, it implies the existence of ultimate authority but leaves the nature of it in doubt, its disjointed and playfully inclusive movements do not aim to persuade its readers to accept a defined hierarchical order as does the private pamphlet. The essay also creates significant tensions around the possibility of imaginative communion: it suggests that the believer in unrestrained imaginative communion may hold the key to a general capacity for sharing imaginative experience, but may also, paradoxically, be excluded from society. It has to present the notion of potential communities acting through the imagination through a less

⁷⁶ Harper, p.99. The order had abandoned the authority of MacGregor Mathers in April 1900. Yeats had been one of those who resisted Mathers and Crowley, but within a year he found himself defending structure and authority against the practices of a majority of the other members.

defined range of belief in common with readers. "Magic" was published in the *Monthly Review*, September 1901, but Foster states that Yeats had begun the essay in October 1900, and delivered it as a lecture on 4th May 1901 to the Fellowship of the Three Kings in London.⁷⁷

The essay opens with a creed, but it is a creed which is non-denominational, which immediately declares only partial knowledge, and which relates occult belief to "the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed". The three doctrines encompass concerns which have provided the terms for literary commentary in other essays: belief in magic is another way of associating and uniting tradition, symbol, community and memory. A licence to associate and to unify are at the centre of belief.

These doctrines are -

(1) That the borders of the mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create and reveal a single mind, a single energy.

(2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.

(3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.
(p.29; p.28)

If the reader was in danger of missing the possibility of aesthetic implications in these doctrines, the first section of the essay ends with the claim that the decay of this belief, once "common over the world", has resulted in a general failure to create beauty. Those who hold this belief are left, unwillingly, able to perceive the results of the general lack of it. Belief in an imaginative unity, however vague, is a guarantee of aesthetic standards. From the beginning, the essay is more concerned with making a claim for a broad range of modes of thought about imaginative creation and reception than with making converts to ritual magic. Different forms of imaginative engagement, notably with literature, are interpolated into the accounts of occult experience so as to break down distinctions between them. The combination of memory and mind allows the possibility for communal access and ultimate order.

⁷⁷ Foster, p.245. The Fellowship "combined literary exchanges with discussions of symbolism and mysticism", p.222. Presumably this made it a sympathetic, non-doctrinaire or at least non-denominational audience for Yeats's association of subjects.

The inclusion of different modes of thought is reflected in the structure of the essay, which encompasses anecdote, vision, intense memory and modified recollection of it, anthropological speculation, and a quoted narrative. It ends in an examination of Yeats's own motives for broaching this subject which swiftly becomes a rhetorical appeal based on the perception of eternal, cyclical history. This essay enacts a continual play with authority and rhetorical mode, courting and containing absurdity and comedy, using god's eye perspectives juxtaposed with personal anecdote, combining a creed with scepticism. Anecdotes illustrate forms of imaginative experience: they are not insisted on as proof of anything very specific, they are offered as private experience which may be made communal. Their import is not as didactic as that narrative of personal learning experiences in "What is Popular Poetry?", and Yeats preserves a sense of the odd and accidental nature of these experiences. These dreams and visions are initially presented as disjointed and ephemeral, although they accumulate to suggest a submerged unity. Significantly, Yeats leaves out details about organised occult groups: this exclusion may stem from a fear of alienating readers, or from a conviction that such groups require privacy, but it is an important element of tact in a book which introduces the notion of select initiated groups so often when describing hopes for art. Stances accumulate and coexist, shifting from one mode or genre to another in succeeding sections. Formal assertions are followed by rhetorical questions, which may be forceful but also suggest doubts, failures, and an uncertainty as to how to transfer these experiences into common life.

Anecdote succeeds creed as the second mode of exposition, but within the anecdote of "Some ten or twelve years ago" describing a magical ritual are two internal narratives describing the visions which the ritual produced. These describe, respectively, an ultimately destructive attempt to bring an artificial human image to life, and an obscure but beautiful ritual. Through this anecdote within anecdote, Yeats affirms experience which comprehends imaginative creation, and which turns out to be about the hazards of making images real, and about esoteric ceremony. The introduction to the vision seems bathetically to disperse the expectation of magical teaching and authority: Yeats's acquaintance has been brought to the occult not by independent belief but by the "hold upon his imagination" exercised by a Bulwer Lytton novel. Thus he "longed to believe," but

“awaited the magical work full of scepticism,” expecting only theatrical illusion. The evoker of spirits (presumably MacGregor Mathers) uses ritual objects but the room is furnished “meagrely and cheaply.”⁷⁸

The images which constitute the visions are prompted by a repeated “form of words.”, and are distinguished from common imaginings by autonomy rather than kind:

Almost at once my imagination began to move of itself and to bring before me vivid images that, though never too vivid to be imagination, as I had always understood it, had yet a motion of their own, a life I could not change or shape. (p.32; p.29)

Yeats’s personal notion of the imagination here is highly inclusive, challenging the reader’s own, but the inclusiveness incorporates an urge towards definition. The anecdote also dramatises a loss of personal control. The visions are described by the seeress, who sees them most clearly, but Yeats finds himself anticipating details. The process of communing in imagination remains unexplained, but certain conditions become apparent, notably the lack of temporal and physical restraint. The first vision is of “perhaps a Fleming of the sixteenth century” and some weeks of his life pass between significant images; the second is of a medieval Crusader, and it includes a long journey and the construction of a stone cross during the visionaries’ dinner-break, and also what appears to be a day-long penance. The acquaintance, one of whose past lives is apparently depicted in the first vision, recognises as a preoccupation and recurring dream the story of a man who makes a “partly alive” human image “by chemical means”. Yeats asks him, as if anticipating the reader, whether he has read *Frankenstein*. The acquaintance is the only one of them who has: what could be bathos retains slight suggestiveness, but to no very definite scheme of imaginative relations. This imaginative communion transcends genre and mode. In the vision Yeats’s acquaintance “as he had been in a past life” is reviled as a magician: we are reminded that misunderstanding and rejection are risks for the imaginatively creative. The second vision culminates briefly in a further level of vision, “rising like a dream within a dream”, which begins to suggest some causal explanation for what has gone before, but the vision of remorse and ritual penitence, “having completed its circle, vanished.” Yeats was

⁷⁸ Mathers was curator of the Horniman ethnographical museum at Forest Hill for a time, but lost this position in 1891: Harper, p.101; Foster, p.105.

“unable to see the “personal significance” of this vision from one of his past lives, but alone recognised its beauty, emphasising his own aesthetic preoccupations. This ritual observed within a ritual suggests that ritual is what persists and is recurrently accessible from the past, continuing the book’s motif of ritual as evasion of accident and impermanence. That impression is only reinforced here by its occurrence among the incidental detail of the occasion.

Throughout the episode, Yeats casts himself as an at least partially objective observer, taking part but exercising moderation and detachment, and unwilling to accept explanations by the initiates as authoritative, though he does note that only he saw parts of the vision. He sets himself apart, rather ironically, from the evoker of spirits whose “mind, like the minds of so many students of these hidden things, was always running on masonry and discovering it in strange places.” The episode ends with analysis of visionary experience and its sources as modified by further experience. Experience has led to confidence in detecting many associations between visions and events, and in connecting symbolic histories to the individual questioner, but Yeats returns through memory to the initial assumption of imaginative unity, hierarchy and an absolute creator:

It may be, as Blake said of one of his poems, that the author was in eternity. In coming years I was to see and hear of many such visions, and though I was not to be convinced, though half convinced once or twice, that they were old lives, in an ordinary sense of the word life, I was to learn that they have almost always some quite definite relation to dominant moods and moulding events in this life. They are, perhaps, in most cases, though the vision I have but just described was not, it seems, among the cases, symbolical histories of these moods and events, or rather symbolical shadows of the impulses that have made them, messages as it were out of the ancestral being of the questioner.

At the time these two visions meant little more to me, if I can remember my feeling at the time, than a proof of the supremacy of the imagination, of the power of many minds to become one, overpowering one another by spoken words and by unspoken thought till they have become a single intense, unhesitating energy. One mind was doubtless the master, I thought, but all the minds gave a little, creating or revealing for a moment what I must call a supernatural artist. (pp.42-4; p.36)

The loosening of definite relations and the tentative establishment of the possibility of others is juxtaposed with a recollected earlier concentration on unitary authority. Significantly the ultimate authority may be created as much as revealed. Further anecdotes follow, describing less ritualised supernatural

imaginative contacts. Personal and reverential tact prevent more examples, and this editorial policy is defended in archaic syntax: "They break forth amid events too private or too sacred for public speech, or seem themselves, I know not why, to belong to hidden things." The uncertainty of community between explicator and reader, initiate and novice, reappears, and the motives of the essay are admittedly complex: "After all, one can but bear witness less to convince him who won't believe than to protect him who does, as Blake puts it". Yeats then offers another, less personal, narrative about learning hidden thought, one which cannot harm the living but describes a perpetually available alternative knowledge as enshrined in an alternative, unofficial tradition: "Joseph Glanvil's description of the Scholar Gypsy." The story has some affinities with *Where There is Nothing* and with *The Speckled Bird* in its account of the heterodox individual quest after knowledge and experience.⁷⁹ It also repeats the paradox which runs through the book: the scholar gypsy gains knowledge outside society, but shares it with those who live conventional lives. The scholar gypsy is also possibly immune to time, and may still live "As Arnold imagined," and as Arnold is briefly misquoted. We are reminded, casually, of the capacity of poetry to transcend time and of its affinity with heterodox knowledge. This anecdotal history of imaginative power demands an alternative literary recognition to that of conventional history, and it describes imaginative connections between extrovert imaginations and their subordinate antitheses who receive. Imaginative communion may have its own hierarchies.

However Yeats immediately expands his commentary on the story outwards from the potential of one powerful human imagination, to posit interwoven and even untraceable imaginative currents which exceed that of certain "imaginative men". Rhetorical gesture then incorporates an insistence on ubiquitous imaginative influence to sweep aside rational and causal history in favour of new ideas of good and evil:

If all who have described events like this have not dreamed, we should rewrite our histories, for all men, certainly all imaginative men, must be for ever casting forth enchantments, glammers, illusions; and all men, especially tranquil men who have no powerful egotistic life, must be continually passing under their power. Our most elaborate

⁷⁹ This narrative about a quester after alternative or potentially iconoclastic thought anticipates Yeats's work with Moore on what became *Where There is Nothing*, and so does not derive from that collaboration.

thoughts, elaborate purposes, precise emotions, are often, as I think, not really ours, but have on a sudden come up, as it were, out of hell or down out of heaven. The historian should remember, should he not? angels and devils not less than kings and soldiers, and plotters and thinkers. What matter if the angel or devil, as indeed certain old writers believed, first wrapped itself with an organized shape in some man's imagination? what matter 'if God himself only acts or is in existing beings or men,' as Blake believed? we must none the less admit that invisible beings, far wandering influences, shapes that may have floated from a hermit of the wilderness, brood over council-chambers and studies and battle-fields. (pp.49-50; pp.40-1)

Proliferating associations and influences undermine the status of conventional ones. The predominant assertion is that "we should never be certain" of the relations between imaginative thought and action. The rhetorical questions introduce authorities, perspectives and beliefs, and successively move beyond them, encompassing rather than rejecting them.

Having asserted the existence of imaginative influence and demanded revaluation of its operation, in the next section Yeats proceeds to approach it through a diachronic view of the decline in awareness of it. Modern life injures the capacity for the reception of influence, "for our life in cities, which deafens or kills the passive meditative life, and our education that enlarges the separated, self-moving mind, have made our souls less sensitive." (p.51; p.41) Again the historical and imaginative demographics are re-adapted to produce the divisions and losses demanded by the particular argument. Vision is said to be almost inevitable for primitive peoples, and examples include that of a Laplander cited by Andrew Lang, and people in Galway, juxtaposed chronotopes of imaginative conditions. Modern life is contrasted both with a past of uninterrupted imaginative range, and with places in the present "where the old order of life remains unbroken". The potential for superrational imaginative contact, a potential either lost or isolated, provides the confidence for a series of rhetorical questions which draw their material from a range of sources in contemporary mythography, folklore, history (including Tacitus), the Bible and literature. The assertion of imaginative potential is articulated through a corresponding rejection of chronological or generic limitation. The examples include Moses, St. Patrick, Druids, and "the Count Saint Germain". The crucial comment on the great memory here may be found in one aside: "St. Patrick, or he of whom the story was first told." Yeats is more interested here in the

persistence of imaginings of remarkable occurrences than in the details of the circumstances. From the future possibility in another rhetorical question that we may “learn some day to rewrite our histories, when they touch upon these things”, the essay returns to ancient times and the origins of poetry and music, and then to the supernatural artist. Such unity as the essay manifests is provided by recourse to a transcendent, potentially absolute principle of unity, but here the absolute principle is connected and perhaps even organised by creative artists:

And just as the musician or the poet enchants and charms and binds with a spell his own mind when he would enchant the minds of others, so did the enchanter create or reveal for himself as well as for others the supernatural artist or genius, the seemingly transitory mind made out of many minds, whose work I saw, or thought I saw, in that suburban house. He kept the doors too, as it seems, of those less transitory minds, the genius of the family, the genius of the tribe, or it may be, when he was mighty-souled enough, the genius of the world. Our history speaks of opinions and discoveries, but in ancient times when, as I think, men had their eyes ever upon those doors, history spoke of commandments and revelations.[...] We are always praising men in whom the individual life has come to perfection, but they were always praising the one mind, their foundation of all perfection.(p.55; pp.43-4)

Further examples describe modern Irish people whose conscious grasp of symbolism is feeble, but who have seen visions in trances of the Trees of Life and of Eden which corresponded to images later seen by the author in a kabbalistic text and a medieval diagram. Lanham notes that the vision which Yeats ascribes to “a young church of Ireland man, a bank clerk” is of a symbol used in a Golden Dawn initiation ritual: the distinction between initiate and outsider is not a firm one, and may be crossed by an untutored mind.⁸⁰ Yeats then forces his argument rather by introducing a potentially sceptical position, but including the supernatural artist in it and then rejecting it as of limited application: “If one can imagine that the seers or I myself or another had indeed read of those images and forgotten it, that the supernatural artist’s knowledge of what was in our buried memories accounted for these visions, there are numberless other visions to account for.” (p.58) Vision and literature are linked by more examples of common symbols, as proof

that there is a memory of nature that reveals events and symbols of distant centuries. Mystics of many countries and many centuries have spoken of this memory; and the honest men and charlatans, who keep

⁸⁰ Lanham, p.217n.

the magical traditions which will some day be studied as a part of folklore, base most that is of importance in their claims upon this memory. I have read of it in 'Paracelsus' and in some Indian book that describes the people of past days as still living within it, 'Thinking the thought and doing the deed.' And I have found it in the prophetic books of William Blake, who calls its images 'the bright sculptures of Los's Halls'; and says that all events, 'all love stories,' renew themselves from those images. (pp.59-60; pp.46-7)

Charlatans, initiates, poets and mystics are accommodated equally in this access to union. The lack of discrimination is polemical: many books as well as visions and beliefs accumulate here.

The section ends with another expansive rhetorical question, which extends the literary transcendence of time to diminish mundane temporal activity, while still rejecting orthodox literary education:

It is perhaps well that so few believe in it, for if many did many would go out of parliaments and universities and libraries and run into the wilderness to so waste the body, and to so hush the unquiet mind that, still living, they might pass the doors the dead pass daily; for who among the wise would trouble himself with making laws or in writing history or in weighing the earth if the things of eternity seemed ready to hand? (p.60; p.47)

Who indeed? All history is subordinated here to the conditions liberating or restraining the imagination. More examples follow. The rhetorical question enacts the paradox that such awareness, although potentially a communal one, may be incompatible with society. It also sets out the challenge of reconciling the role of a symbolist poet with that of a national cultural spokesman. The reader's incredulity is anticipated, but directed via Yeats's own early opinions into an equally extreme explanation, which is then rejected. In an apparently incidental manner, Yeats's recapitulation of his own learning experience also relates his failure to recognise the power of symbolism to a problem of speech, a dissociation of sensibility:

It was long before I myself would admit an inherent power in symbols, for it long seemed to me that one could account for everything by the power of one imagination over another, telepathy as it is called with that separation of knowledge and life, of word and emotion, which is the sterility of scientific speech. (p.63; p.48)⁸¹

The product of his learning is a rhetorically posed conviction which seems to measure out an extension of consciousness:

⁸¹ In 1924 this became "another, or by telepathy, as the Society for Psychical Research would say", Lanham, p.224n.

I cannot now think symbols less than the greatest of all powers whether they are used consciously by the masters of magic, or half unconsciously by their successors, the poet, the musician and the artist.⁸² (p.64; p.49)

The great memory establishes these relations between symbols and “certain events and moods and persons”: this affirmation of a supreme authority leaves associations open to interpretation. Although recognising authority, it permits symbolic power to “Whatever the passions of man have gathered about”, allowing association rather than dictating priority. The last section professes alarm at having revealed secrets, drawing our attention again to this difficult revelation of what is hidden. Yeats dramatises the tensions of the essay as they affect his position: he is communicating between “those lean and fierce minds at war with their time” and the readers of *Ideas of Good and Evil*.

Yeats then claims to have decided to excise passages which “seemed, I know not why, to belong to hidden things”: the essay is styled as even more disjointed as a result of editing according to principles of which the reader must necessarily be ignorant. This lapse in confidence prompts a contrary declaration. With a great frequency of “I”s, the essay has doubted and fretted over providing a connection between other initiates and a wide audience, but with determination comes a movement into “we”:

I must commit what merchandise I have to this ship of written speech, and after all, I have many a time watched it put to sea with not less alarm when all the speech was rhyme. We who write, we who bear witness, must often hear our hearts cry out against us, complaining because of their hidden things, and I know not but he who speaks of wisdom may not sometimes in the change that is coming upon the world, have to fear the anger of the people of Faery, whose country is the heart of the world - ‘The Land of the Living Heart.’ Who can keep to the little pathway between speech and silence, where one meets none but discreet revelations? And surely, at whatever risk, we must cry out that imagination is always seeking to remake the world according to the impulses and the patterns in that great Mind, and that great Memory? Can there be anything so important as to cry out that what we call romance, poetry, intellectual beauty, is the only signal that the supreme Enchanter, or some one in His councils, is speaking of what

⁸² Ellmann notes that Mallarmé made similar connections between art and magic in “Magie”, an article in the *National Observer* 28th January 1893. Ellmann, *W. B. Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (London: Macmillan, 1949), p.93. The association is also prominent in Yeats’s essay “The Symbolism of Poetry”.

has been, and shall be again, in the consummation of time? (pp.68-9; pp.51-2)

After the protestation of hesitancy, the rhetorical questions accumulate with increasing confidence to profess a certainty of the recurrence of spiritual patterns. The essay has become ritualistic too. Consummation may also be modified by recurrence: the familiar prediction of a coming change may suggest that a change is always coming upon the world.

In this literary essay and in its tangential critical implications Yeats becomes a kind of medium, proposing to his readers the connection between symbols revealed by occult means, and literature. The associations and influences attributed to the imagination destabilise orthodox history and moral codes, defamiliarise the ostensible subject by proliferating implications, and generate perspectives which offer absolute relativism as well as absolute order. Heresy, both by orthodox and by occult standards, is actively sought as a necessary and productive risk. While adopting the connotations of religious ritual, Yeats must also add the possibility for adaptation within repetition.

Michael Bell suggests that Yeats's uses of the word "dream" are "able to do in homely and subliminal ways what would not be possible for a more overtly problematic term like 'myth'."⁸³ The motifs from dreams, the ritualisation of experience and of visions here also accumulate some "homely and subliminal" suggestions between the grander claims. The essay has alternated between a relatively restrained list of experiences, recounted with little evident impulse to persuasion, and extreme rhetorical questions which force revaluation of interpretation. "Magic" may itself be a revelation anticipated but not arriving, or remaining private rather than general: the possibility remains slim of readers accepting its revaluations and abandoning rational schemes in favour of belief in and accompanying reception of imaginative influences.

The failure of a perpetually imminent unifying revelation to occur as a literal event required its adaptation more completely to metaphor and to individual achievement. Like Yeats's preparation of rituals in this period for his planned occult society, the "Castle of Heroes", the anticipated broadly communal ritual never took place, but its conception provided a set of theoretical and adaptable

⁸³ Bell, p.44.

rituals in his own aesthetics. The ideal of the subjectivist poet's interpretation of eternity into poetry could also not continue to be so vague, and to rely on such unrestrained selection of tradition: in shifting to a position in which the present phase was seen as not conducive to easy imaginative access, Yeats began to find metaphors for the difficulty of restructuring and continuing inheritance. This also allowed him to make more testing approaches to earlier authors, using the division between what was tainted by its era and what transcended it to more sophisticated purposes. The replacement of vague desire for imaginative revelation by a more difficult concept of restructuring corresponds to the replacement of transfiguration by incarnation in the letter to Russell. The perception of phases itself then became a way of registering losses of potential and of declaring the necessity for careful rearrangement. It formed an accommodation between the perspectives outside and within time, or times. The references to the great memory and the communal imagination in these essays tend to merge memory with imaginative creativity: this may be enabling in that it diminishes the importance of priority and influence-anxiety, but it does not really consider the difficult achievement of revivifying symbols in the present and for an audience in an age which does not comprehend access to a unifying communal imagination. Vague inclusiveness assists the construction of associations and equivalences, and allows a range of material to be offered to an audience, but the equivocation of "a mood, or a community of moods" ("The Moods") had eventually to be questioned.

The weaknesses of the vague imaginings of anticipated communal revelation are already evident, as are the advantages of allowing doubt and crisis to have a presence, and to be dramatised. Yeats's succeeding critical essays and poetic acknowledgments of inheritance continue to use selective phases to complicate linear successions but they do so to register failure and to justify distortion and adaptation as the problematic necessities of the poet writing at successive points on the curve of imaginative history. One response to Yeats's own recognition of the instabilities and groundless optimism of some earlier positions is already evident in some of these essays: it was to build loss and disjunction into his assessments of cultural change while confronting difficulties and limitations as challenges and as measures of achievement. Another is apparent in the essays which I consider in the next chapter: it was to link hopes and beliefs to more practical programmes, and to

take pride in excluding art which he found to be unfit for his chosen traditions. Where the earlier predictions of reawakening are based on desire for the total fulfilment of a lack, later considerations of tradition allow that such a complete restoration is impossible, and make new forms of imaginative history in registering losses of potential and recreations of tradition which are limited, personal or aristocratic rather than universal and formless. The frustrated anticipation of revelation becomes only one point in a pattern which comprehends belief and disappointment.

Another aspect of the new age concerns the cultural centrality of poetic traditions. Blake, Shelley, contemplatives and magicians are all treated as social outsiders who reject or depart from the conventional modes of thought of their time. Yeats's chosen traditions are nothing if not oppositional, and even his expositions of symbolism rely on occult relationships which oppose conventional histories and causal relations. The prediction of a new age is a prediction of a new dispensation in which these alternative histories and traditions will be recognised as the significant ones.

Yeats abandoned few ideas entirely, he reabsorbed and converted them, sometimes into contradictory or almost unrecognisable forms. In some cases, he attributed his own earlier aesthetic positions to romantic failures who had not achieved similar development beyond those positions. He continued to use images of revelation when describing his colleagues from the Rhymers' Club: in their cases access to eternal wisdom and symbolism was retrospectively portrayed as private and brief artistic success resulting in personal failure in life, in isolation and in death. Through his autobiographical writings this revelatory success becomes a matter of personality and of an apocalyptic self-judgment; it is among the highest compliments which Yeats pays, but involves a failure to engage in new accommodations with time which is perceived by the poet who has not failed.

Both Linda Dowling and Denis Donoghue quote Jorge Luis Borges, Donoghue with reference to Yeats's own comments on life as preparation and Dowling with reference to Yeats's continuing use of revelation and apocalypse: "this imminence of a revelation which does not occur is, perhaps, the aesthetic

phenomenon.”⁸⁴ Like many of Borges’s formulations, this is teasingly suggestive and difficult to apply to particular cases or to extrapolate from: it fulfils its own aesthetic criterion. It does seem relevant to Yeats’s aesthetics, and to the development of those aesthetics, in that some of Yeats’s aesthetic formulations imagine art as part of a general and communal revelation, but others and mostly later ones accept that this communal revelation does not occur. Revelation becomes a private ideal, an escape from time and temporal knowledge, pursued by small groups of initiates in ritualistic art. In earlier formulations, community is part of revelation, in later ones it is the ideal which has failed to be realised.

I do not wish to overestimate the developments in Yeats’s thought through the period during which these essays were written, because I suggest that there are aspects of *Ideas of Good and Evil*, of *The Wind Among the Reeds* and of much of Yeats’s subsequent writing, which make it tempting for readers to see ubiquitous and perpetual development between such positions. These aspects include: the accommodation of previous beliefs into a system of personal phases which is repeatedly mapped onto one of broader phases; a persistent pursuit of grand imaginative history, and even eternal pattern, which is nevertheless constantly modified by contingency; an attention to the temporal qualities of rhythm in poetry and prose which aspires to cut across history. Eternity is measured against time, not once, but successively, so that each such measurement becomes a previous part of the past time bearing on the present, and the past and present are again measured against the attractions of apocalypse, eternity and escape from time. Yeats’s work always seems to be moving on, never more so than when making new recognitions of loss, and to be making new accommodations with time, because he uses stages and phases as metaphors for modes of thought, life and of art. And each synthesis of such phases becomes a phase too, perpetually present on the page, but available for performance and reassessment. The circular connections between subjects in this volume as a whole tend to look like developments when looked at on a local level: arguments whose grounds and terms are always shifting, always voracious, appear to progress, when they are creating a circular, mutually supportive structure.

⁸⁴ Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siecle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p.246; Denis Donoghue *William Butler Yeats* (New York: Viking, 1971),

Short prose sections, variations of sentence length and shifts between rhetorical modes assist this. In terms of accepting and adapting influences, particularly, Yeats continued to discover further advantages in these notions of cycles and phases, in contrasting literary history with ideas of eternity, and in selection using these unorthodox principles.

In the next chapter I will consider the essays which confront the more problematic aspects of the modern poet's use of symbolism and its relations with audience. The excess and diversity stressed in the essays I have considered here are replaced by an interest in the uses of restraint, and even of monotony. I will stress two points: revelation and apocalypse continue to recur as motifs, they do not disappear after a particular date in the course of the writing of the essays which make up the volume; the modification of the potential of imaginative influence can also already be anticipated in the essays which I have examined. These articulate a freedom to associate and to select, but this freedom clearly evades rather than negotiates some questions about tradition and about audience, questions which Yeats had already set about considering, and to which I now turn.

p.17; "The Wall and the Books", trans. by James E. Irby, in *Labyrinths* by Jorge Luis Borges, ed. by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp.221-3, p.223.

Chapter 2

Ideas of Good and Evil: Histories of Society as Audience

The remainder of the essays in *Ideas of Good and Evil* return again and again to more and less stable notions of community and to examinations of what constitutes community, ideal, aesthetic and real, but in these pieces community is imagined as a difficult achievement to be worked for, not just predicted. I will examine the essays in four sections according to the principal themes of each essay, but it will be evident that, as in my first chapter, ideas and connections recur. Some of the more original aesthetic formulations produce even more bewildering syntheses by linking rhythm and audience, or literary form and racial history. In the essays I have already considered, potential or real communities are frequently evoked: for instance “a community bound together by imaginative possessions” (“The Galway Plains”); “a mood, or a community of moods” (“The Moods”); “many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind” (“Magic”), and the essays themselves invite entry by readers into modes of imaginative community. “The Theatre”, “Speaking to the Psalter” and “What is Popular Poetry?” continue to imagine imaginative communities, but they do so with a recognition that poetry may not reach a large popular audience, even though they profess that the creation or recreation of such an audience is their final aim. The essays which I will discuss in this chapter generate yet further histories of poetry and drama, but within more muted, contingent and practical treatments. I have organised the essays into four groups by their principal subjects, in order to analyse Yeats’s uses of ideas of community and of history in different areas. “The Celtic Element in Literature” and “Ireland and the Arts” take two approaches to the nation as an imaginative community with its own spiritual history and artistic aims and possessions. In “Symbolism in Painting” and “The Symbolism of Poetry” images of revelation of eternity and examinations of symbols as possessions of a communal memory are combined in sustained manifestos for the view of poetry and of all arts which Yeats promotes throughout the volume. In “The Happiest of the Poets” and “At Stratford-on-Avon” he returns to the opportunistic production of varieties of literary, spiritual and national history to read and criticise two major models. Morris was particularly important to Yeats personally and to his ideas of

the role of art in community; Shakespeare provided opportunities for constructing histories and for considering England as a failure of traditional community. In both cases, Yeats reads forms of communal, spiritual and national history in the work of his predecessors.

1. Poetry, Rhythm and Audience: “The Theatre”, “What is Popular Poetry?” and “Speaking to the Psalter”

Ideas of Good and Evil opens with “What is Popular Poetry?” and “Speaking to the Psalter”: both essays examine connections between poetic rhythm and audience, and the juxtaposition of the consideration of popular poetry with that of a new esoteric mode of poetry performance further declares a refusal to separate discussion of technique from that of audience. “The Theatre” also sets a projected artistic theatre against popular melodramatic and realistic modes: in doing so it declares an authority to pronounce on modes of social, national and artistic history while establishing the functions of convention. The style of the essays rejects public and discursive modes of debate while compulsively linking themes: rhythm with momentary yet profound experiences, poetic technique with secret craft and religion, notions of time and rhythm with theories of imaginative development, insistent contemporaneity with artistic failure, moments with historical phases. The ordering of ritualistic performances is set against ephemeral life and demographic change. Art offers the possibility of creating a chronotope, a located stability of imaginative and cultural values.

“The Theatre” combines two essays, which had both been published in the *Dome* (April 1899 and January 1900), and, with some revisions, in *Beltaine* (May 1899 and February 1900), under the titles “The Theatre” and “The Irish Literary Theatre”. Some of the original material was also adapted from a letter to the *Daily Chronicle*.¹ The two sections both trace the decline of theatre into melodrama and excessive decoration, and assess the deterioration of poetic drama in terms of broader imaginative declines, particularly as symptomatic of contemporary England. The complete essay is not entirely consistent: the first section puts forward analyses of artistic development which seem to be proscribed by the extrovert rejection of developmental accounts in the second. However, consistency does not seem to be the principal concern. Rather Yeats is seeking ways of justifying unpopularity in terms of national imaginative history. In doing so he claims to know which conditions of artistic development are favourable to the production of revelatory works which in turn make nonsense of such development.

¹ *The Collected Letters of W B Yeats*, Volume II ed. by Warwick Gould, John Kelly and Deirdre Toomey (Oxford: O. U. P., 1997), pp.347-51, 347n.

This manifesto, both commercial and ritualistic, for an artistic theatre modifies its aristocratic selectivity by suggesting that “simple people who understand from sheer simplicity what we understand from scholarship and thought” will not be excluded from the artistic community. This pursues the congruity of simplicity and sophisticated labour which was declared in the Blake essays and forms part of the idealistic cultural myth of the volume as a whole. In this case the inclusion of “simple people” is perhaps even less convincing than usual, but it is connected to the objections to the commercial theatre. The principal objection is that in trying to replicate Nature visually, the theatre has made the conventions of poetic drama seem inappropriate. However, both very sophisticated and rural people are set beyond such superficiality, which is designed to meet the demands of the city-dwelling middle-classes. The essay shifts modes: it begins with anecdote, in this case an anecdote in which Yeats’s own aesthetic opinions are confirmed by experience. It then proceeds through registers, including a public discursive mode which relates possible modes of analysis, and an individualistic rhetorical authority which pushes aside such discussion. Proceeding from rhetorical question which rejects the majority taste and refuses to respond to it, and from an ensuing imperative towards different principles, Yeats makes the announcement that the principles expounded are those of a specific group who “have planned the Irish Literary Theatre”: the specific project is introduced as a necessary response to prevailing conditions.

After considering a “common opinion” which blamed the managers for the failure of poetic drama, and an explanation by Laurence Binyon blaming poets, Yeats decides to blame the audience through a socio-aesthetic historical analysis relying on a standard of permanence residing in the imagination, a permanence offering a stability lacking in human history:

I find it easier to believe that audiences, who have learned, as I think, from the life of crowded cities to live upon the surface of life, and actors and managers, who study to please them, have changed, than that imagination, which is the voice of what is eternal in man, has changed. The arts are but one Art; and why should all intense painting and all intense poetry have become not merely unintelligible but hateful to the greater number of men and women, and intense drama move them to pleasure? The audiences of Sophocles and of Shakespeare and of Calderon were not unlike the audiences I have heard listening in Irish cabins to songs in Gaelic about ‘an old poet telling his sins,’ [...] Mr Bridges’ *Return of Ulysses*, one of the most

beautiful and, as I think, dramatic of modern plays, might have some success in the Aran Islands, if the Gaelic League would translate it into Gaelic, but I am quite certain that it would have no success in the Strand. (pp.260-1; pp.166-7)

This new mode, which is a return to an old mode, is at war with its time, or at least with the fashions of its time.

Blake has said that all Art is a labour to bring again the Golden Age, and all culture is certainly a labour to bring again the simplicity of the first ages, with knowledge of good and evil added to it. (p.261; p.167)

This quotation from "A Vision of the Last Judgment" offers an authoritative model for Yeats's imaginative historicism and ahistoricism: it sanctions the use of a mythical era in defining aesthetics. The labour is dwelt upon rather more than the difference made by that knowledge. Yeats goes well beyond Blake in his application, to a tentative prophecy of imaginative rebirth through an extraordinary explanation of the negative feedback effect in the history of dramatic presentation. In this history of the imagination, days and eras merge into mythic stages, each with their own mythic protagonists and audiences

The drama has need of cities that it may find men in sufficient numbers, and cities destroy the emotions to which it appeals, and therefore the days of the drama are brief and come but seldom. It has one day when the emotions of cities still remember the emotions of sailors and husbandmen and shepherds and users of the spear and the bow; as the houses and furniture and earthen vessels of cities, before the coming of machinery, remember the rocks and the woods and the hillside; and it has another day, now beginning, when thought and scholarship discover their desire. In the first day, it is the Art of the people; and in the second day, like the dramas acted of old times in the hidden places of temples, it is the preparation of a Priesthood. It may be, though the world is not old enough to show us any example, that this Priesthood will spread their Religion everywhere, and make their Art the Art of the people. (pp.261-2; pp.167-8)

Demographics determine art but may also be determined by it, as passing phases regenerate deep communal memory. The flame has been passed to, and has made, a priesthood: it seems that this art has become religious by being unpopular, if only temporarily unpopular. A priesthood has at least a potentially central status and function in society, subject to another re-establishment of imaginative communion, which may or may not happen. The ambiguity about whether the priesthood may gain a following runs through these essays. It distinguishes Yeats's analyses of the potential of contemporary art from those of Symonds in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, in that Symonds repeatedly stresses the artist's isolation as integral to his exposition of symbolist aesthetics. Yeats had of course offered some more

pessimistic accounts of the failures of individual revelations to be shared in his apocalyptic stories, which are also covert imaginative histories.

This inventive, synthetic history is succeeded by an equally remarkable application of a theory of reception to the visual aspects of dramatic technique, which have become overvalued and over-elaborate as actors responded to the discovery that “an always larger number of people were more easily moved through the eyes than through the ears”. Noble oratory was replaced by “the poor art of acting, that is content with the sympathy of our nerves”. In opposition to this, and claiming the authority of William Morris, Yeats sets an ideal represented by actors who would “know how to speak poetry with the half-chant men spoke it with in old times.” The failure of the theatre, like the limitations of contemporary art considered in the other two essays I discuss here, is approached as a problem of rhythm.

The connections proliferate. Scene decoration and costume have detracted from drama because they require no imaginative effort from an audience, but they are also symptomatic of general conditions, perfecting “the theatre of commerce, the masterpiece of that movement towards externality in life and thought and Art, against which the criticism of our own day is learning to protest.” Beside these representations of “the superficial appearances” of Nature, poetry seems out of place because it is founded on convention “and becomes incredible the moment painting or gesture reminds us that people do not speak verse when they meet upon the highway.” Yeats’s alternative is to restrain both gesture and scenery to the “grave and decorative”, so that

the mortal actors and actresses may change without much labour into the immortal people of romance. The theatre began in ritual, and it cannot come to its greatness again without recalling words to their ancient sovereignty. (pp.265-6; p.170)

Imitations of nature and the pursuit of immediate sensation are to be replaced by formal control which evokes timelessness. The restoration of a particular aesthetic community is a matter of medium.

The first section ends with speculations on the slow training of actors and painters in this new discipline, and with a recollection of one of Yeats’s more intense memories which recurs in his formulations concerning rhythm:

and in Ireland I have heard a red-haired orator repeat some bad political verses with a voice that went through one like flame, and made them seem the most beautiful verses in the world; but he has no

practical knowledge of the stage, and probably despises it.² (pp.266-7; p.170)

The rejection of the conventions of the commercial theatre is emphasised by the appeal to other conventions, which are reinforced by the conviction of personal memory, and which brush aside the unambitious norms of contemporary theatrical performance.

The short second part of "The Theatre" operates with a compression of subjects to produce formulations with a forceful confidence in the author's capacity to describe the movements of racial, intellectual and artistic traditions. Between appeals to the authorities of Dionysius the Areopagite, Euripides and William Blake, rational modes of development are rejected in one sustained paragraph which stresses sudden extrovert movements in art by confounding measurement, time and expected artistic relationships. At the start, the origins of intellectual influences are re-mystified through a learned yet rather bizarre allusion:

Dionysius, the Areopagite, wrote that 'He has set the borders of the nations according to His angels.'³ It is these angels, each one the genius of some race about to be unfolded, that are the founders of intellectual traditions; and as lovers understand in their first glance all that is to befall them, and as poets and musicians see the whole work in its first impulse, so races prophesy at their awakening whatever the generations that are to prolong their traditions shall accomplish in detail. It is only at the awakening - as in Ancient Greece, or in Elizabethan England, or in contemporary Scandinavia - that great numbers of men understand that a right understanding of life and of destiny is more important than amusement. In London, where all the intellectual traditions gather to die, men hate a play if they are told it is literature, for they will not endure a spiritual superiority; but in Athens, where so many intellectual traditions were born, Euripides once changed hostility to enthusiasm by asking his playgoers whether it was his business to teach them, or their business to teach him. (pp.267-8; p.171)

Modern London is equated with spiritual collapse and ignorance, the antithesis of the values of Yeats's book, but in spite of the declaration that these conditions are

² The orator was John Taylor. Yeats later recalled that hearing Taylor read at a Young Ireland Society meeting gave him "a conviction of how great might be the effect of verse, spoken by a man almost rhythm-drunk, at some moment of intensity, the apex of long-mounting thought", *Autobiographies*, p.99.

³ Lanham notes that Yeats learnt this famous phrase from Charles Johnston, that he also quoted it in "The Literary Movement in Ireland" (first published in the *North American Review* December 1899), and in the article from which "The Moods" was reprinted, and that it also echoes a speech of Parnell's delivered in Cork in 1885, Lanham p.440n. Again, "eternal" criteria for art and for

inevitable at a particular phase, the force of the piece is directed towards an exhortation to attempt ways of understanding, an attempt made possible by an act of willed belief. Perhaps a nation can awaken if it is made to understand the possibility of awakening, if appreciation of intense difficulty replaces casual assumptions in the comprehension of national and cultural history. Yeats seeks to educate his readers in the limitations of education, to shock them into recognising the effectiveness of shocking change. The essay dramatises conflicting notions of social and artistic history in careful juxtaposition of phrases.

New races understand instinctively, because the future cries in their ears, that the old revelations are insufficient, and that all life is revelation beginning in miracle and enthusiasm, and dying out as it unfolds itself in what we have mistaken for progress. It is one of our illusions, as I think, that education, the softening of manners, the perfecting of a law - countless images of a fading light - can create nobleness and beauty, and that life moves slowly and evenly towards some perfection. Progress is miracle, and it is sudden, because miracles are the work of an all-powerful energy, and nature in herself has no power except to die and to forget. (p.268; pp.171-2)

The rhetorical wrestling with assumptions and distinctions about modes of art and of life anticipates “At Stratford-on-Avon”, in which Yeats proclaims that “a man’s business may at times be revelation, not reformation” (p.154). The disestablishment of notions of progressions through time is more fundamental to Yeats’s redefinitions than this adoption of the terms of religious mystery might immediately suggest: Ireland has become a “new race” here, but elsewhere in the volume its newness and ancientness are invoked alternately.

By now, we have lost sight of the Irish Literary Theatre entirely. Instead, this section has become an exercise in constraining and reordering patterns of thought, and in revising the history of thought. The rejection of mundane and common ideas of artistic development seems to have little direct connection back to the consideration of theatrical conventions, but it does act as a parallel: its authoritative re-ordering of time and history, like the ideal drama described earlier, has the privileged capacity to reach beyond temporality and mortality and to legislate on their conditions. The essay ends with a Blake quotation, confirmed by personal and ostensibly common experience, which exercises a similar containment:

nationhood turn out to be informed by a synthesis of recent politics, and remembered political personalities, with technical plans for insistently contemporary artistic projects.

If one studies one's own mind, one comes to think with Blake, that 'every time less than a pulsation of the artery is equal to six thousand years, for in this period the poet's work is done; and all the great events of time start forth and are conceived in such a period, within a pulsation of the artery.'⁴ (pp.268-9; p.172)

The final section in the periodical publication, which referred to specific plays, was excised to allow the essay to end with this revision of time.

"What is Popular Poetry?" gains obvious prominence from opening *Ideas of Good and Evil*.⁵ The volume ends with "Emotion of Multitude": all of the versions of literary history and criticism between are framed by these assessments of the challenge, the difficulty and the possibility of creating the communal and national, imagination of an audience. Like many of these essays, "What is Popular Poetry?" proceeds through a retrospective, compressed elucidation of some of Yeats's earlier views, with some modification of those views in the light of experience. The increased rigour of Yeats's standards for national literature launches the volume as an account of his considered and mature position on national culture and the means of promoting it. His account of the maturing of his own ideas implies a need for a more widespread maturity and sophistication in cultural nationalism opposing some kinds of simplicity and directness. The autobiographical mode also helps to shift the argument into Yeats's own terms. The essay returns to Yeats's controversy with Charles Gavan Duffy over the New Irish Library, but he does not name the poets whose work is involved: this may be read as both tact and exclusion.⁶ Some unlikely sudden shifts between subjects prepare for reformulations and syntheses which are created in the admitted flux of Yeats's changing views. Evocations of nation, class and inheritance of traditions inform this account of the relations of poetry to audience, but these relations are also insistently linked to rhythm. I will trace the patterns of movement between

⁴ Yeats also quotes this in "William Blake and his Illustrations to The Divine Comedy". Both quotations are slightly inaccurate, and slightly different, versions of *Milton* 28.62-29.3.

⁵ "What is Popular Poetry?" was first published in *Cornhill Magazine*, March 1902, although Yeats earlier seems to have intended it for the *Speaker*. He wrote to Lady Gregory on 6 June 1901 that it was "ready all but the quotations" (*Letters* 3, p.79). Toomey suggests that the publication "in the conservative London *Cornhill*" rather than in a journal more central to cultural debate in Ireland may have allowed Yeats to formulate his own response to attacks by D. P. Moran while avoiding a lengthy controversy. Deirdre Toomey, "Moran's Collar: Yeats and Irish Ireland", *Yeats Annual* 12 (1996) ed. by Warwick Gould and Edna Longley, pp.45-83, pp.62-3.

⁶ Foster notes that the dispute was also related to anxieties as to where Irish cultural initiatives should be located. Yeats's revision of the terms of argument in this essay may also aim to circumvent those anxieties as well by placing his hopes firmly in Ireland, but in a certain aspect of Ireland; Foster, pp.118-21.

tenses, and between recollections and assertions, which gradually reconfigure what Yeats presents as the matter of tradition. Among the most compressed of the essays in the book, “What is Popular Poetry?” is at once pugnacious and evasive.

Yeats’s own early aesthetic programme is summed up here as seeking a style that would not be English, but “musical and full of colour”, and which would produce a tradition giving rise to “a really great school of ballad poetry in Ireland”. The next development of this programme was the belief that writing on folk beliefs and legends would help to create this style. The principal qualities of this are not severely modified in retrospect; what is modified is their naive application to ballad poetry. Even this is presented as a surprising folly, untypical of a poet who has “never been quite certain that one should be more than an artist, that even patriotism is more than an impure desire in an artist.” The qualifications allow some evasiveness and the awkward balance between folly and not quite certain principle may suggest a determination to leave room for manoeuvre within cultural nationalism. It proceeds by turning aesthetics into biography: retrospect now assimilates past folly as “one of the illusions Nature holds before one, because she knows that the gifts she has to give are not worth troubling about”. Although casual and fanciful, this suggests an aesthetic imperative, a need for art to be created, which might take precedence over any concern with serving the needs of an existing audience or even of a nation. For Yeats, this allows “Nature” an unusual degree of authority, but then undermines it. The attempt to improve the ballad-writers drove Yeats both to “a library to read bad translations from the Irish, and at last down into Connaught to sit by turf fires”, seeking both written and unwritten traditions. Yeats is founding his politically unpopular criticism of the ballad writers on personal experience of having tried to make them better, but also suggesting that he discovered more of Ireland and of scholarship in this laudable attempt which only took him further from those writers.

The recollection of youthful literary ideals allows a kind of doubleness to this essay: there is vacillation over the extent to which these ideals have changed. These “illusions” are certainly undermined, but even they are justified as necessary illusions, illusions which have generated poetry. The retrospective judgment on other former opinions is even less clear. Some of them are offered for gentle ridicule, others seem to persist into the present, but the two categories are not always sharply divided. The determining qualities of experience seem to be

increasing subtlety, technical application and knowledge of popular poetry and folklore in rural Ireland. However, the elision between former and present aesthetic programs operates beside a similar progressive elision of other categories, like the initially clear opposites of popular and coterie poetry. Yeats's unwillingness to accept contemporary definitions of what constitutes popular poetry is a product of experience. The emphasis on learning by experience is a refutation of some journalistic opinions: Deirdre Toomey suggests that Yeats saw "the Moran of 1901 as the devil's walking parody of that young iconoclast of the 1880s, whose head was filled 'with thoughts of making a whole literature'"⁷. In effect, Yeats incorporates the positions of opponents into some early and now abandoned personal phases. Within *Ideas of Good and Evil*, the polemical stance of the essay is supported by many other reformulations of the terms of cultural disputes.

The essay gradually comes to refuse the simple categorisation into popular and coterie, and to undermine rather than to answer the question in its title. It refuses a logic of art which is attributed to the newspapers and the middle classes, in favour of an evasive remystification.

I wanted to write 'popular poetry' like those Irish poets, for I believed that all good literatures were popular and even cherished the fancy that the Adelphi melodrama, which I had never seen, might be good literature, and I hated what I called the coteries. I thought that one must write without care, for that was of the coteries, but with a gusty energy that would put all straight if it came out of the right heart. I had a conviction, which indeed I have still, that one's verses should hold, as in a mirror, the colours of one's own climate and scenery in their right proportion; and when I found my verse too full of the reds and yellows Shelley gathered in Italy, I thought for two days of setting things right, not as I should do now by making my rhythms faint and nervous and filling my images with a certain coldness, a certain wintry wildness, but by eating little and sleeping on a board. [...] It seemed to me that it did not matter what tune one wrote to, so long as that gusty energy came often enough and strongly enough. [...] I would indeed have had every illusion had I believed in that straightforward logic, as of newspaper articles, which so tickles the ears of the shopkeepers; but I always knew that the line of Nature is crooked, that, though we dig the canal beds as straight as we can, the rivers run hither and thither in their wildness. (pp.4-5; pp.4-5)

This unpredictable Nature remains vague, but is credited with ultimate authority, rather like the "supernatural artist" in "Magic". That ultimate authority seems to have at least as much rhetorical as theoretical importance. The personal instinct

⁷ Toomey, p.61.

which recognises the irrational line of Nature also enables the recognition of other, equally unruly and equally crucial, lines: those of traditions.

Yeats's first discovery from studying folk traditions was that "what we call popular poetry never came from the people at all". Longfellow, Campbell, Mrs Hemans, Macaulay, Scott and, with more careful explanation and some reservation, Burns, are all rejected as poets of the middle class, of

people who have unlearned the unwritten tradition which binds the unlettered, so long as they are masters of themselves, to the beginning of time and to the foundation of the world, and who have not learned the written tradition which has been established on the unwritten. (p.6; p.6)

Yeats may have been encouraged to take this stance by particular attacks, notably by D. P. Moran, who declared the need for an Irish Burns and who had asked why Yeats could not write like Burns.⁸

This scheme of valuation, then, relies on the extent to which poetry contains a tradition and so becomes the possession of a people. Traditional symbols do not have to retain only a particular significance: the very fading and changing of the application of symbols is what contains their history. Poetry with tradition is contrasted with Longfellow's:

No words of his borrow their beauty from those that used them before, and one can get all that there is in story and idea without seeing them, as if moving before a half-faded curtain embroidered with kings and queens, their loves and battles and their days out hunting, or else with holy letters and images of so great antiquity that nobody can tell the god or goddess they would commend to an unfading memory. Poetry that is not popular poetry presupposes, indeed, more than it says, though we, who cannot know what it means to be disinherited, only understand more, when we read it in its most typical expressions, in the *Epipsychidion* of Shelley, or in Spenser's description of the gardens of Adonis, or when we meet the misunderstandings of others. (pp.7-8; pp.6-7)

The facile simplicity which needs no tradition is measured and condemned by this lyrical description of what it lacks, in contrast to these exemplary displays of symbolic richness. The implied ideal is poetry which preserves and perpetually suggests a prior tradition, a common memory, an imaginative community with the past. This ideal does not include stasis in the meaning of symbols, but rather a resonance between imaginative works.

⁸ *Letters*, III, p.19n, 20n: the editors cite Moran's frequent attacks on Yeats and on symbolist poetry. Moran considered symbolist poetry to be insufficiently accessible. Also Toomey, p.62, p.80n.

The misunderstandings of others are then represented by the exhortation to test poetic appreciation: “Go down into the street and read to your baker or your candlestick-maker any poem which is not popular poetry”. The sample audience appears to be defined by nursery-rhyme. Yeats then cites the example of a baker who failed to appreciate particular lines of Tennyson’s. However, Deirdre Toomey points out that ‘F. P.’ in the *Leader* (8th June 1901) had queried these very lines of Tennyson’s: the utilitarian baker “who was clever enough with his oven” (p.8; p.7) is really a hostile journalist, here being warned off.⁹

The lost connection between the two traditions is actually a set of associations, notably the “association of beauty with sorrow which the written tradition has from the unwritten, which had it in its turn from ancient religion”. A further example, a favourite quotation from Nashe, repeated in “The Symbolism of Poetry” (p.242; p.156), declares the gain in both art and life available to those who appreciate that tradition can coexist with simplicity, in contrast to “what men lose who are not in love with Helen.” The traditional element in this case is elegiac, it encapsulates loss, but it is also what persists and gives resonance through time. Helen, the fall of Troy and associated motifs came to form one of Yeats’s own most important complexes of poetic symbols, so this is perhaps a very personal account of how tradition resonates, particularly when it demonstrates that memory and celebration of beauty outlast beauty itself, that the recognition and formulation of loss and fracture may be the substance of tradition. A casual remark on these examples, with its simple and perhaps even proverbial imagery, implies a confidence in the mental recreation of tradition:

I pick my examples at random, for I am writing where I have no
books to turn the pages of, but one need not go east of the sun or west
of the moon in so simple a matter. (p.9; pp.7-8)

However, Lanham notes that “The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon” is a section of Morris’s *The Earthly Paradise*.¹⁰

In frankly dismissive terms, Yeats asserts that the debased standards of the middle class are derived from inadequate imitation, and that they tyrannise over anything different. In reaction to such stifling convention, he offers a synthetic formulation, the terms of which implicitly exclude the standards here decried:

⁹ Toomey, p.62.

¹⁰ Lanham, p.156n.

There is only one kind of good poetry, for the poetry of the coteries, which presupposes the written tradition, does not differ in kind from the true poetry of the people, which presupposes the unwritten tradition. Both are alike strange and obscure, and unreal to all who have not understanding, and both, instead of that manifest logic, that clear rhetoric of the 'popular poetry,' glimmer with thoughts and images whose 'ancestors were stout and wise,' 'anigh to Paradise' 'ere yet men knew the gift of corn.' (p.10; p.8)¹¹

Opportunistic prehistoricism guarantees resonance to word and symbol. The important quality of these traditional images and thoughts is they create the sensibility of the audience:

Yet we know somewhere in the heart that they have been sung in temples, in ladies' chambers, and our nerves quiver with a recognition they were shaped to by a thousand emotions. (p.10; p.8)

Traditional images and the remnants of primitive religion are then traced in the song of an "Aran fisher-girl" and the nuptial song of the "Gael of the Scottish islands". In these synthetic traditions Christianity has become another mode of folklore. Lanham notes that the first appears in Lady Gregory's *Poets and Dreamers* (1903), and that Yeats slightly alters the latter from Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gaedlica: Hymns and Incantations* (1900), the alterations tending to simplify diction.¹² Yeats advertises the use of such anthologies, but not to the extent of preserving their contents unaltered.

Provocative syntheses continue to form Yeats's socio-aesthetic formulations until the end of the essay. The crucial synthesis of original popular and sophisticated verse, towards which the essay as a whole has been moving, is itself achieved through a habit of association attributed to "the people" before society lost its original synthesis. In a parallel movement, "the people" as curators of traditional associations provide the authority for an assessment of the ideal and original synthesis between poetry and common speech, between "unchanging" and quotidian uses of language:

I soon learned to cast away one other illusion of 'popular poetry'. I learned from the people themselves, before I learned it from any book, that they cannot separate the idea of a craft from the idea of a cult with ancient technicalities and mysteries. They can hardly separate mere

¹¹ Lanham shows that these phrases are slightly misquoted from the section of *The Earthly Paradise* entitled "The Man Born to be King", Lanham p.157n. As influences on Yeats's notions of cultural community and constructions of cultural history, elements of Morris's oeuvre and recollections of the man himself recur in different ways. The version of Morris presented in "The Happiest of the Poets", is perhaps all the more stylised and limiting because Morris's example as a writer on aesthetics, community and history remained a central one.

¹² Lanham, p. 157n, 158n.

learning from witchcraft, and are fond of words and verses that keep half their secret to themselves. Indeed, it is certain that before the counting-house had created a new class and a new art without breeding and without ancestry, and set this art and this class between the hut and the castle, and between the hut and the cloister, the art of the people was as closely mingled with the art of the coteries as was the speech of the people that delighted in rhythmical animation, in idiom, in images, in words full of far-off suggestion, with the unchanging speech of the poets. (pp.13-4; pp.10-11)

Even in anecdote about the sources of personal learning, the belief of the people anticipates what is found in books. Their attribution of the connotations of mystery and traditional craft to poetic creativity justifies sophistication and difficulty, the original qualities of their speech guarantee that symbolical verse is within and not outside a popular tradition. The original division between written and unwritten can be repaired by the synthesising capacities inherent in symbolism.

The essay closes with a further application of the written/unwritten dichotomy to national literature. The proliferation of new Irish literary societies is noted with some mature hindsight and with an element of patronising mockery. The faults of this new interest in Irish literature are attributed to the journalism which “urges them to desire the direct logic, the clear rhetoric, of ‘popular poetry’.” This literary ideal is misguided, and covertly English:

It [contemporary Irish journalism] sees that Ireland has no cultivated minority, and it does not see, though it would cast out all English things, that its literary ideal belongs more to England than to other countries. I have hope that the new writers will not fall into its illusion, for they write in Irish, and for a people the counting-house has not made forgetful. (p.14; p.11)

Among those whose first language is Irish, possession of “the unwritten tradition” and its attendant critical faculties is almost inevitable. Again, an aspect of Ireland is allowed to have escaped the divisive power of history. The Irish language becomes a guarantee of aesthetic standards, presumably because it has not undergone the process of social division, which has left so few in the English-speaking world, perhaps no more “than the ten thousand the prophet saw, who have enough of the written tradition education has set in room of the unwritten to know good verses from bad ones”. While deriving the decay of poetic language from England, Yeats does allow the authority of learning to be a necessity for English-language culture. Indeed the rarity of such learning in the English-speaking world, and the fact that alternative crude rhetorical habits come from England, effectively demonstrates that English-speaking culture is divided. The

position of the Irish poet who writes in English might seem to be uncertain, but it is not clarified here: although England and Ireland are antinomies there is the possibility that such a poet could take the craft of the English tradition, since craft is permitted by the Irish unwritten tradition, and could write for an audience who still have that tradition.

The concluding expression of the possibility of imaginative re-birth in the English tradition again recruits Blake to support its authority to declare what is permanent and what passes. In effect, Yeats proceeds from his refusal to accept the distinction between popular and coterie poetry by displacing this union onto Irish speakers, who form a linguistic nation all of whom possess natural judgment derived from unbroken tradition. From assessing the numbers of the chosen among speakers of English and of Irish, Yeats turns to a pseudo-quotation and then an actual quotation from Blake, both of which he uses elsewhere in the volume:

Nor can things be better till that ten thousand have gone hither and thither to preach their faith that 'the imagination is the man himself,' and that the world as imagination sees it is the durable world, and have won men as did the disciples of Him who -

His seventy disciples sent

Against religion and government. (p.15; pp.11-2)

Lanham notes of the first quotation that "many lines in Blake echo this thought, but not in these exact words"; the second is from "The Everlasting Gospel", and ends the essay with a defiant and revisionist proselytising which is supported by a poetic tradition.¹³ However, these hopes must be balanced by the recollection of another anticipation of poetic development which was gently mocked at the start of the essay, and which was described as "one of the illusions Nature holds before one". "What is Popular Poetry?" contains the possibility that all programmes for the creation of a broad audience are misguided in their literal aims and expectations but fruitful in the literature which they produce. This complex might be seen as another version of the prophecy which is not entirely refuted although not fulfilled, which is valuable as an aesthetic event. The arrangement of contrasts, between England and Ireland, popular and coterie, earlier and present Yeatsian critical positions, also includes potential change between such positions, delineating a mode of literary history as potential, allowing the possible availability of recognitions and restitutions to England, Ireland and other English speakers.

¹³ Lanham, p.161n.

As Linda Dowling observes, Yeats chooses his audience from a variation of the Paterian “ideal of the aesthetically competent few”, but Yeats’s syntheses in *Ideas of Good and Evil* rely on the potential extension of aesthetic competence to a people, who guarantee developing and living language.¹⁴ The rejection of ‘popular poetry’ as it was generally perceived is a rejection of lax standards and of a broader range of arguments concerning the function of poetry in culture. It becomes an opportunity for another new characterisation of traditional culture. Extraordinary shifts are succeeded by syntheses, and synthesis and association rather than logical clarity and explicitness become the criteria for new poetry as well as the modes for its encounter with tradition.

The concern in “What is Popular Poetry?” with speech which “delighted in rhythmical animation” but which was also “closely mingled” with “the unchanging speech of the poets” is developed to a practical purpose in the next essay “Speaking to the Psalter”.¹⁵ The constraint of time in verse-rhythms and their capacity to hold attention inform this manifesto for a new art which recalls ideas of primitive art and of ritual. This practical programme follows immediately from the missionary zeal at the close of “What is Popular Poetry?”, and implicitly gives that zeal a specific direction. This manifesto for a new convention is as unconventional as any essay in the volume, particularly in its stress on practical action. Ronald Schuchard’s acute summary of many readers’ immediate reactions takes the form of a suitably rhetorical questioning of idiosyncratic folly: “What was this notoriously tone deaf and musically ignorant poet trying to prove with his monotonous chanting and naive theories of recitation?”¹⁶ Schuchard examines Yeats’s lectures and their relation to ideals of community. I will concentrate on the essay’s uses of literature and of spoken performance as they suggest modes of history and project possible future developments.

“Speaking to the Psalter” is informed by a distrust of written literature and an ambitious determination to find an alternative to the silent reading of poems in the rhythmical performance of them. Like “What is Popular Poetry?” it seeks a restitution of realised community to literary production, but its insistence on small

¹⁴ Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), p.259.

¹⁵ First published in the *Monthly Review*, May 1902, but also delivered many times as a lecture.

¹⁶ Ronald Schuchard, “The Minstrel in the Theatre: Arnold, Chaucer, and Yeats’s New Spiritual Democracy”, in *Yeats Annual* 2 (1983) ed. by Richard J. Finneran, 3-24, p.3.

groups tends to suggest that the performances are esoteric coterie events rather than more broadly public ones. Yeats relishes the connotations of initiation and ritual which chanting to an instrument can offer. These connotations reinforce his assertions that speaking to the psaltery is not an innovation but rather a renaissance of an old art, to which he and those listeners who respond will have remained faithful. Ritualistic performance of verse is at once ordered, phenomenal, and shared in a certain community, a community which is definitely there having a common experience of art. Ritualistic performance of rhythms suspends the time on the occasion, it also resists the depredations of time in a wider sense if an unchanged piece is given successive performances, and beyond that implies a rebirth of original poetics.

The essay opens with another recalled opinion, now confirmed:

I have always known that there was something I disliked about singing, and I naturally dislike print and paper, but now at last I understand why, for I have found something better. I have just heard a poem spoken with so delicate a sense of its rhythm, with so perfect a respect for its meaning, that if I were a wise man and could persuade a few people to learn the art I would never open a book of verses again. (p.16; p.13)

Speaking to the psaltery, then, seems to offer realisation, liberation and precision. Both prejudices are emphatically confirmed by the present excitement after the end of a performance. Yeats retains some indication that the essay had been a lecture, further emphasising speech and event. Definition is initially largely negative: this art is not singing, liturgical chanting or recitation; the concern for performing the rhythm of the written piece is the most precise element of this. The first section ends with a compliment to Florence Farr which notes her talent as something rare in the present but known in “the ancient world”. This permits the remarkable next paragraph, which moves from fanciful dreams of ancient performance to idealisation of its community, and to the assumption that a community in the present shares this idealisation:

Since I was a boy I have always longed to hear poems spoken to a harp, as I imagined Homer to have spoken his, for it is not natural to enjoy an art only when one is by oneself. Whenever one finds a fine verse one wants to read it to somebody, and it would be much less trouble and much pleasanter if we could all listen, friend by friend, lover by beloved. Images used to rise before me, as I am sure they have arisen before nearly everybody else who cares for poetry, of wild-eyed men speaking harmoniously to murmuring wires while audiences in many-coloured robes listened, hushed and excited. (pp.17-8; p.14)

The synthesis of preoccupations includes spoken language, ancient ritual and ideal community in its projection of an art to be revived. The suspension of ephemeral accident is characterised by a synthesising trance-state, in which linguistic order produces vision, and the vision is of an imagined audience in the past. Ritualistic performance comes to imply community with the past in a mode of compulsive imaginative association.

Further speculations and opinions are recounted, which have delivered a suggestion that poetry by a particular writer may have idiosyncratic and recurrent sound-patterns. Experiments with a song from *The Countess Cathleen* are also described, with jocular comments on trial and error, and are illustrated by an example of the notation for them. Even if Yeats is not directly inviting the reader to try this at home, and so to create another live audience, he is at pains to demonstrate practicality and realisation of theoretical aims. The convictions behind the enterprise depend on notions of literary form considered in terms of the sound of words: speaking to the psalter offers a means of demonstrating the functions of form in evocation rather than more direct and overt communication.

The notation which regulates the general form of the sound leaves it free to add a complexity of dramatic expression from its own incommunicable genius which compensates the lover of speech for the lack of complex musical expression. Ordinary speech is formless, and its variety is like the variety which separates bad prose from the regulated speech of Milton, or anything that is formless and void from anything that has form and beauty. The orator, the speaker who has some little of the great tradition of his craft, differs from the debater largely because he understands how to assume that subtle monotony of voice which runs through the nerves like fire.

[...] All art is, indeed, a monotony in external things for the sake of an interior variety, a sacrifice of gross effects to subtle effects, an asceticism of the imagination. But this new art, new in modern life I mean, will have to train its hearers as well as its speakers, for it takes time to surrender gladly the gross efforts one is accustomed to, and one may well find mere monotony at first where one soon learns to find a variety as incalculable as in the outline of faces or in the expression of eyes. (pp.24-5; pp.17-8)

This art does offer a restitution of community, but community must learn the discipline of “new art”. The need to train performers, perhaps in “some Order naming itself from the Golden Violet of the Troubadours or the like”, is balanced by the equal need to educate audiences. In this respect, the essay expands on ideals which were put forward in “*The Return of Ulysses*”, and, as there, the enterprise is

also aimed at the theatre: a wholesale reformation of the performance of verse is recommended, with implications for the reformation of all speech:

They would get a subtlety of hearing that would demand new effects from public speakers, and they might, it may be, begin even to notice one another's voices till poetry and rhythm had come nearer to common life. (p.26; p.19)

Thus a revived and more disciplined convention, rejecting "the intonation that copies the accidental surface of life", would re-invest the common and communal speech from which poetry claims its authority; poetry would come nearer to life as the audience for poetry would begin to listen to the speech of life as to that of art. Insistence on convention remakes community and regains naturalness. Yeats insists that this circular dependence of poetry and speech re-establishes both traditional and imaginary modes of possessing tradition as the performers would also learn "like the Irish *File*, so many poems and notations that they will never have to bend their heads over the book to the ruin of dramatic expression and of that wild air the bard had always about him in my boyish imagination" (p.27; p.19).

In a useful corrective to critical emphases on Yeats's reversion to ideals of a chosen few, Ronald Schuchard stresses the interdependence of these technical ideals with ideals of "spiritual democracy", and shows how these ideas were developed over the next five years into a program for a "revived oral culture".¹⁷ This interdependence of convention and ideal community is driven by a self-validating imagination, which imagines a growing audience because it imagines the advantages of this ritualised performance. However, the enthusiasm for technical innovation, rather than the more vague hopes for a culturally created community may reflect a disenchantment with notions of general revelation and may suggest the pursuit of a different kind of development and restitution instead, directed by this ministry of minstrelsy. The essay seems to gain assurance from its refusal to compromise with low expectations, and with realist modes of performance which lack the conventions to determine their relations with time and with audience.

¹⁷ Schuchard, pp.3-4.

2. National literature: “The Celtic Element in Literature” and “Ireland and the Arts”

Yeats’s hopes and fears for Irish culture are the subject of much of *Ideas of Good and Evil*. They inform his constructions of traditions, including his versions of English traditions, and the many imaginings of a rebirth of communal imagination and of other forms of communion are primarily expressions of various ways of imagining the potential cultural future of Ireland. These two essays approach the assessment of national literature and its criticism more directly, but still insist on recasting argument into their own idiosyncratic terms for describing cultural histories, and evading rather than accepting or rejecting other nationalist analyses. Again, the essays return to the relation of literature to certain kinds of community, but the communities described can remain ambiguous: the collective “we” retaining or generating imaginative possessions may be the Irish, it may be poets, or it may be a potential cultural elect who accept the terms promoted here.

Versions of imaginative development, rather than of essential national qualities, form the structures of Yeats’s analysis. This critical mode brings a mythopoeic faculty to bear on the history of poetry and is a kind of poetic history. It also proves more malleable than more essentialist readings. Much of Yeats’s consideration of the Irish literary past and future relies on notions of imaginative history even more idiosyncratic than those applied to English parallels, but one duality in particular dominates: that contemporary Irish literature has the problems and the privileges of being both ancient and new. This condition is frequently set against characterisations of England as too possessed by modernity. The duality can be complicated further, since for Yeats ancientness can occasionally include both possession of indigenous ancient literature and potential participation in the developed and even exhausted English poetic tradition. New developments are frequently predicated on a return to traditional national subjects; the more vague ideas of spiritual rebirth also suggest that a world which has developed beyond Ireland must now develop back into the spirituality which Ireland has never entirely lost. The ideal mode of culture is located back into in a past time, a golden age, which is effectively out of time, or at least without history. Portions of contemporary Ireland retain this culture to the extent that they have also remained immune to the developments of modern culture. The “traditional and new” complex might also be seen as pressing particularly on this genre at this time: it

features in criticism by the major figures of the revival, and the essay on the potential for Irish literature was a genre which was both established and increasingly pertinent at the turn of the century. However, the duality has displayed its own persistence: Robert Welch concludes the preface to *Changing States: Transformations in Modern Irish Writing* (1993), with the assertion that “Irish people, it may be said, are amongst those who are, at one and the same time, deeply archaic and immediately contemporary”.¹⁸ This is a surprisingly static model with which to introduce a study of transformation, and suggests that the terms introduced by the Revival, and by Yeats in particular, are too enabling to be rejected. The Yeatsian combination of a chronotope of persisting original conditions with potential new invigoration of such conditions has itself become a chronotope in this perpetual duality. The examples of Yeats’s opportunistic versions of history offer a licence to accommodate, and studies of literary history continue to take advantage of this rather than examining it. The looseness of that phrase “at one and the same time” is relevant to my readings of *Ideas of Good and Evil*: Yeats negotiates the subjects and the valuations of these essays by evoking forms of time and escape from them, with careful manipulations of the literary times involved in the writing and the reading of essays, and of imaginings of cultural succession and simultaneity. In his negotiation of ideas of cultural tradition through free manipulations of concepts of time and development, Yeats articulates some of his own stances within contemporary disputes and also prepares for his own successive encounters with traditions. His histories generate patterns with ambiguous relations to time: he dates oppositions between cultural elements when dating proves advantageous, but can make those oppositions cyclical or perpetual when expanding the range of reference.

The original version of “The Celtic Element in Literature” was presented as a talk in December 1897 to the Irish Literary Society, was enlarged for publication in *Cosmopolis* in June 1898, and then further extended for *Ideas of Good and Evil*.¹⁹ In the volume it follows the Blakean revisions of time at the close of “The Theatre”. The essay sets out to reassess two of the most significant contributions to this subject: Renan’s “The Poetry of the Celtic Races” (1859) and Arnold’s *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867). To an extent which is perhaps surprising, Yeats

¹⁸ (London: Routledge, 1993), p.xi.

¹⁹ Toomey, p.51.

largely accepts some of the summaries of these predecessors, but adapts them from racial essentialism to modes of analysis which could ostensibly be applied to any race at the same point of development. One implication of this is that Yeats is able to perceive and authoritatively to describe a transnational model of significant history, through evocations of original imaginative potential and contact and beyond recognisable modes of literary history and criticism.

Arnold's and Renan's phrases are repeated in the assumption that they are familiar, although Yeats is reluctant to allow them too much influence:

Though I do not think any of us who write about Ireland have built any argument upon them, it is well to consider them a little, and see where they are helpful and where they are hurtful. If we do not, we may go mad some day, and the enemy root up our rose-garden, and plant a cabbage-garden instead. Perhaps we must restate a little, Renan's and Arnold's argument. (p.272; p.174)

The doubt over whether these predecessors have provided any foundations is perhaps misleading, since expansions and variations on Arnold and Renan recur in much cultural theory during the Revival, and even writers critical of these models tended to take on some of their terms. Approaching these major figures again supports Yeats's revision of the terms of analysis, and his bizarrely expressed undervaluation may be informed by a need to destabilise their non-Irish authority.

The ambivalent attitude towards Arnold may also have been a defence against Irish nationalists who would reject the authority of such a major English critic, but it proved not to be a successful one. As Deirdre Toomey shows, this lecture itself attracted abuse from D. P. Moran, who ridiculed the celebration of "the Celtic note" as solely a means of advertising in the English literary market.²⁰ Moran attacked Yeats's emphasis on pre-literate Ireland: his own support for the Irish language and for Irish Ireland operated through quite different characterisations from Yeats's. However, his predictions for the rebirth of literature in Irish were at least as extreme, in their own way, as any of Yeats's prognostications.²¹

Reeves and Gould state that "Yeats went to Renan for two discrete aspects of his own thought in the nineties, namely the significance of the Celtic genius and

²⁰ Toomey, pp.50-4; Yeats did defend himself in a letter to the *Leader* (UP2, pp237-42), specifically claiming that "'Celtic Renaissance' and 'Celtic note' were 'vague grandiloquent terms which he sought to avoid and only used in quotation - from Arnold,'" p.54.

²¹ Toomey, p.53.

the shape of the religion of the future.”²² They demonstrate Yeats’s knowledge of Renan’s work on religious history, and trace other intermediaries whose work Yeats also knew and who had adapted Renan’s ideas. Yeats followed Renan in seeing art as becoming increasingly religious, but extended the association between art and religion even further, and also relocated it in the past as part of an original condition which could be re-established.

The second section begins the redefinition of characteristics which Arnold termed Celtic, reallocating them to “every people in the world” in an original condition. It also co-opts research into folklore:

When Matthew Arnold wrote it was not easy to know as much as we know now of folk song and folk belief, and I do not think he understood that our ‘natural magic’ is but the ancient religion of the world, the ancient worship of nature and that troubled ecstasy before her, that certainty of all beautiful places being haunted, which it brings into men’s minds. (p.275; pp.175-6)

To his redefinition of Arnold’s characterisations, Yeats adds a familiar element, “the impassioned meditation which brings men beyond the edge of trance”, but he is content to proceed with the adjustment from essential to historical definitions by quoting and misquoting Arnold’s quotations “to prove a Celtic influence in English poetry” and making these his proof. A further aspect of this re-orientation is its effect on Arnold’s contrast of the Celtic mode with the Greek one. In Yeats’s interpretation, this actually presents the “Greek” mode as characteristic of developed rather than original imaginations. Reaching backwards through literary history he makes a brief and simplifying selection from Arnold’s examples of this mode in Keats, Shakespeare and Virgil, as representative of the lack of symbolic perception of nature:

They looked at nature in the modern way, the way of people who are poetical, but are more interested in one another than in a nature which has faded to be but friendly and pleasant, the way of people who have forgotten the ancient religion. (pp.278-9; p.178)

Although he attributes this ancient religion to the state of development of spiritual history rather than to innate qualities, this still leaves the Celts with an exceptional capacity for imaginative transcendence and ecstasy, a capacity lost elsewhere. Yeats does universalise folklore, but not to deny Ireland’s advantages, though, as Moran noticed, he risks overemphasising primitivism. The characterisation of this

²² Marjorie Reeves and Warwick Gould, *Joachim of Fiore and the Myth of the Eternal Evangel in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: O. U. P., 1987), pp.215-227, p.215.

capacity is developed into a description of a transformative imaginative intensity which governed all perception, “in a world where anything might flow and change”, a world without temporal measurement or limitation. This imaginative indulgence is then indulged, as lost capacities are tantalisingly evoked in rhetorical gestures which reject measurement. The possibility of access to these specifically mythopoeic capacities is raised and then made problematic:

They worshipped nature and the abundance of nature, and had always, as it seems, for a supreme ritual that tumultuous dance among the hills or in the depths of the woods, where unearthly ecstasy fell upon the dancers, until they seemed the gods or the godlike beasts, and felt their souls overtopping the moon; and, as some think, imagined for the first time in the world the blessed country of the gods and of the happy dead. They had imaginative passions because they did not live within our own strait limits, and were nearer to ancient chaos, every man’s desire, and had immortal models about them. The hare that ran by among the dew might have sat upon his haunches when the first man was made, and the poor bunch of rushes under their feet might have been a goddess laughing among the stars; and with but a little magic, a little waving of the hands, a little murmuring of the lips, they too could become a hare or a bunch of rushes, and know immortal love and immortal hatred.

All folk literature, and all literature that keeps the folk tradition, delights in unbounded and immortal things. [...] Oisín, new come from his three hundred years of faeryland, and of the love that is in faeryland, bids St. Patrick cease his prayers a while and listen to the blackbird, because it is the blackbird of Darrycarn that Finn brought from Norway, three hundred years before, and set its nest upon the oak-tree with his own hands. Surely if one goes far enough into the woods, one will find there all that one is seeking? Who knows how many centuries the birds of the woods have been singing?

All folk literature has indeed a passion whose like is not in modern literature and music and art, except where it has come by some straight or crooked way out of ancient times. (pp.280-282; pp.178-80)

And what comes out of ancient times is an access to immortality, to imaginative excess and to a mythopoeic capacity. Oisín is both already a major figure in Yeats’s career, and so demonstrably available for modern literature, and a symbol of the opposition between original mythic resource and belated and debased imagination. Again, Yeats finds a model for his mode of literary history within myth which has become his own poetry.

Further examples of excess are cited, but Yeats also transforms excess into a capacity for imaginative transformation in an account of the formation of mythologies. This account seems to place a remarkable level of imaginative power in original individuals, but also demands that consideration of such power provides

authority for a revaluation first of logical contradiction, and then of the terms of Arnold's criticism and of the perception and representation of reality:

When an early Irish poet calls the Irishman famous for much loving, and a proverb, a friend²³ has heard in the Highlands of Scotland, talks of the lovelessness of the Irishman, they may say but the same thing, for if your passion is but great enough it leads you to a country where there are many cloisters. The hater who hates with too good a heart soon comes also to hate the idea only; and from this idealism in love and hatred comes, as I think, a certain power of saying and forgetting things in politics, which others do not say and forget. The ancient farmers and herdsmen were full of love and hatred, and made their friends gods, and their enemies the enemies of gods, and those who keep their tradition are not less mythological. For this 'mistaking dreams,' which are perhaps essences, for 'realities' which are perhaps accidents, from this 'passionate, turbulent reaction against the despotism of fact,' comes, it may be, that melancholy which made all ancient peoples delight in tales that end in death and parting, as modern peoples delight in tales that end in marriage bells; and made all ancient peoples, who like the Irish had a nature more lyrical than dramatic, delight in wild and beautiful lamentations. [...] And so it is that all the august sorrowful persons of literature, Cassandra and Helen and Deirdre, and Lear and Tristan, have come out of legends and are indeed but the images of the primitive imagination mirrored in the little looking-glass of the modern and classic imagination. (pp.284-6; pp.181-2)

The reassessments are pervasive: one of Arnold's most resonant phrases about Celts is not contradicted but obliquely endorsed through a redefinition which reverses priority between imagination and observed life; in this account lyric is the primitive and original, not the sophisticated and belated form; classic and modern are placed together in contrast to their greater source; poetry of lamentation is for once not a product of Irish history, as it seems to be in "The Galway Plains", but of original unlimited imagination (and so perhaps even of a lack of history in terms of national events). Contrasts between racially or nationally distinct literatures are refuted by the accumulation of examples. Yeats's reassessments both promote a literary history of a kind, by claiming national imaginative development as the dominant force in forming modes of imagery, and questions more conventional histories by placing classical and modern in the same mode. He is engaged in that nineteenth century Irish enterprise which Joep Leerssen describes as "a constant search for some permanent principle which would define the essence, the transhistorical formula, of Irishness", but his values remain imaginative ones and

resonate beyond Irish imaginative possessions while still allowing Ireland priority in the present.²⁴

The argument keeps returning to the identification of these excessive qualities as Irish, and then a redefinition of them as ordinary. This pattern re-emerges with the reassessment of Arnold's consideration of the Celtic contribution to ideal genius, which is converted into the terms of Yeatsian spiritual history but which swiftly metamorphoses into a rejection of utilitarianism and of art as criticism of life on the grounds that "it may be the arts are founded on the life beyond the world, and that they must cry in the ears of our penury until the world has been consumed and become a vision". For once it is Samuel Palmer rather than Blake who provides authority for the concentration on excess. Having exercised these transformations and expansions Yeats then sets out an account of European literary history as a periodic flooding by imaginative excess. This account cites Renan, and although it again recasts Arnold's argument and goes much further, it effectively parallels Arnold by stressing that the sources of this imagination are Celtic:

I will put this differently and say that literature dwindles to a mere chronicle of circumstance, or passionless phantasies, and passionless meditations, unless it is constantly flooded with the passions and beliefs of ancient times, and that of all the fountains of the passions and beliefs of ancient times in Europe, the Slavonic, the Finnish, the Scandinavian, and the Celtic, the Celtic alone has been for centuries close to the main river of European literature.²⁵ It has again and again brought 'the vivifying spirit' 'of excess' into the arts of Europe. (p.290; p.185)

This Celtic source has supplied Dante, Shakespeare and Arthurian literature, even before the imminent flooding in the present: "a new fountain of legends, and, as I think, a more abundant fountain than any in Europe, is being opened, the great fountain of Gaelic legends". Through Yeats's transformations of his subjects into the terms of imaginative history, the Celtic element has become the Celtic movement, a new phase of "intoxication" for which the world is prepared. Anti-materialists, the Pre-Raphaelites and symbolists are recruited as

²³ In 1924 Yeats added a note here: "William Sharp, who probably invented the proverb, but invented or not, it remains true."

²⁴ Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), p.224.

²⁵ In 1924 Yeats added a note which makes a considerable alteration to his stress on ancient myth: "I should have added as an alternative that the supernatural may at any time create new myths, but I was timid."

precursors and perhaps prophets, suggesting not only a broader return to ancient wisdom, but incidentally a broader endorsement of Yeats's own revaluation of Arnold's notions of art.

The arts by brooding upon their own intensity have become religious, and are seeking, as I think Verhaeren has said, to create a sacred book. They must, as religious thought has always done, utter themselves through legends; [...] while the Irish legends move among known woods and seas, and have so much of a new beauty, that they may well give the opening century its most memorable symbols. (pp.294-5; p.187)

The final paragraph, dated 1902, cites Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* as the proof that these legends have reached a wider audience to fulfil the prediction above.

In the essay as a whole Yeats only partially adapts Arnold's terms from racial essentialism to present a view of imaginative history as the interaction of races in different stages of development. In this system the circumstances which permit artistic creation are traced to their origins in different phases of cultural development. Effectively, the Celts remain a source, although one about to flood the world. It is in the nature of racial essentialism to suggest that qualities are perpetually present, and by being perpetually ancient Yeats's Celts have such fixed qualities while other races do not. Obviously this offers possibilities for the international importance of Celtic literature in the near future, but actually avoids the problem of whether modern Celtic literature can develop and ignores any prior development in literature in Irish. The broad claims made for the potential of Irish literature rest uneasily on a combination of Celtic influence on other literatures, and on the assertion that Celtic literary history has hardly started. The real purpose of Yeats's redefinitions has been to introduce these imaginative histories based on notions of origin and to challenge critical rather than racial ideas. Recurrent access to timeless ancientness is yet another formulation of that recurrent access to eternity ascribed to Shelley and Blake; the potential influence of the Celtic Movement on the rest of the world is another version of the restitution of the Golden Age which Yeats adapted from Blake. Yeats seldom gets far from English poets, but in adapting them he radically revises ways of imagining history and tradition. Yeats's stress on myth and mythic conditions, though, does tend to exclude any other kind of history in Ireland as irrelevant. Leerssen summarises some general aspects of nineteenth century writing about Ireland: "Ireland

becomes everything that is excluded by the bald statement of what is the case: Ireland is couched in terms of what used to be, what failed to be, what might have been, what must become.”²⁶ Yeats’s stress on imaginative concerns to some extent excuses his lack of interest in contextual events, and he even suggests that imaginative creations are in some way the opposite of political and historical developments, a compensation for a lack of political power. He does claim some persistence of essential qualities but the substance of his argument returns to potential, to restitution of ideals: in spite of declared confidence in persisting qualities, these essays do display an anxiety for a real and demonstrable development while existing in an uneasy relation with matters of fact.

“Ireland and the Arts” takes a more oppositional approach.²⁷ While still suggesting that Ireland has much to offer the world in the future in the way of artistic and spiritual renewal, in its opening it stresses crisis rather than just cyclical diminution and growth of art: “The arts have failed; fewer people are interested in them in every generation”. However, it employs the same notions of religious fervour, and a bewildering succession of religious connotations to the propagation of artistic principles which will be national but not restrictive. Here the concept of a priesthood which will proselytise is combined with the reliance on the people as a source of passion:

We who care deeply about the arts find ourselves the priesthood of an almost forgotten faith, and we must, I think, if we would win the people again, take upon ourselves the method and the fervour of a priesthood. We must be half humble and half proud. We may see the perfect more than others, it may be, but we must find the passions among the people. We must baptize as well as preach. (pp.320-1; p.203)

This preoccupation with religion is itself not very humble: Yeats declaims on the sources of religious ritual with a confidence which guarantees that the adaptation of ritual back to the arts is entirely legitimate:

The makers of religions have established their ceremonies, their form of art, upon fear of death, on the hope of the father in his child, upon the love of man and woman. They have even gathered into their ceremonies the ceremonies of more ancient faiths, for fear a grain of the dust turned into crystal in some past fire, a passion that had mingled with the religious idea, might perish if the ancient ceremony perished. [...] In very early days the arts were so possessed by this

²⁶ Leerssen, p.226.

²⁷ “Ireland and the Arts” was first published in the *United Irishman*, August 31 1901, but was initially presented as a lecture to the National Literary Society on 23 August, *Letters* 3, p.107n.

method that they were almost inseparable from religion, going side by side with it into all life. But, to-day, they have grown, as I think, too proud, too anxious to live alone with the perfect, and so one sees them, as I think, like charioteers standing by deserted chariots and holding broken reins in their hands, or seeking to go upon their way drawn by the one passion which alone remains to them out of the passions of the world. We should not blame them, but rather a mysterious tendency in things which will have its end some day. (pp.321-2; pp.203-4)

So the arts should gain the ritualistic connotation of religious mystery to counteract an opposing “mysterious tendency”. The relations between the arts and religion are also, like so many of the thematic principles of *Ideas of Good and Evil*, subject to the systole and diastole of an ultimate spiritual and historical pattern which the reader must take on trust.

According to Yeats, Morris and his colleagues have offered one kind of reaction by trying “to unite the arts once more to life by uniting them to use”, as an indirect attempt to return passions to “the perfect”, but Ireland offers other and readier possibilities. As in the two essays which follow this one to conclude the volume, Yeats is celebrating the Irish community of “imaginative possessions” which at least potentially allow art to reach a broader audience, and not be confined to coteries. Here, though, perhaps because of the accumulating references to religion, Yeats broaches an aspect of this subject which he may have found problematic:

But here in Ireland, when the arts have grown humble, they will find two passions ready to their hands, love of the Unseen Life and love of country. I would have a devout writer or painter often content himself with subjects taken from his religious beliefs; and if his religious beliefs are those of the majority, he may at last move hearts in every cottage. While even if his religious beliefs are those of some minority he will have a better welcome than if he wrote of the rape of Persephone, or painted the burning of Shelley’s body. (pp.322-3; p.204)

Presumably even religious beliefs like Yeats’s own offered potential because of their inclusiveness. The phasal process of fading and revival should permit, and might even demand, heterodox uses of traditional belief: Yeats attempts to evade some of the problems which his own heterodoxy presented to Catholic orthodoxy.

After this address to conventional national artists and would-be artists, Yeats turns to those who believe as he once did “that art is tribeless, nationless, a blossom gathered in No Man’s Land”. As Deirdre Toomey notes, guardedly, this “does accommodate a very modified Irish Ireland position”, but still continues to

pursue its own formulations of what constitutes imaginative and cultural community and does this through reference to other cultures.²⁸ Citing the example of the Greeks, Yeats makes a forceful, and relatively uncomplicated appeal for Irish art to treat Irish subjects, whether myth, history or locality, as other countries have produced art on national subjects “when they moved as a whole people and not a few people who have grown up in a leisured class and made this understanding their business”. Given Yeats’s dispute with Eglinton on this matter, even this is not uncontentious, but it is inclusive rather than restrictively dogmatic. Alternative notions of progress are dismissed throughout this essay, all the more forcefully by being associated with the English:

An Englishman, with his belief in progress, with his instinctive preference for the cosmopolitan literature of the last century, may think arts like these parochial, but they are the arts we have begun the making of. (p.326; p.206)

The appeal made, with a subtle and not coincidental suggestion that this art came from an unforced national unity, Yeats then turns to the more contentious issue, the demand that an artist should not “try to make his work popular”. Instead, he declares the necessity for a proud integrity of personal vision. Perhaps as a corrective to his celebrations of imaginative community, this declaration is extrovert and even pugnacious, while claiming an ultimate sanction:

In this matter he must be without humility. He may, indeed, doubt the reality of his vision if men do not quarrel with him as they did with the Apostles, for there is only one perfection, and it sometimes has the form of the religious life and sometimes of the artistic life; and I do not think these lives differ in their wages, for ‘The end of art is peace,’ and out of the one as out of the other comes the cry: *Sero te amavi, Pulchritudo tam antiqua et tam nova! Sero te amavi!* (p.327; p.207)

St Augustine’s endorsement of a continuity between ancient and new follows a less ancient authority, Coventry Patmore, and is followed in this historically synthetic complex by an analogy with religion (a rare example in *Ideas of Good and Evil* of Yeats applying for artistic authority to a central Catholic authority rather than to heterodox religious positions). This is followed by another, more personal authority: where we might have expected a quotation from Blake to support the authority of a poet, we are given one from Yeats’s fellow editor of Blake, Edwin Ellis:

²⁸ Toomey, p.61.

The Catholic Church is not less the Church of the people because the Mass is spoken in Latin, and art is not less the art of the people because it does not always speak in the language they are used to. I once heard my friend Mr. Ellis say, speaking at a celebration in honour of a writer whose fame had not come till long after his death, 'It is not the business of a poet to make himself understood, but it is the business of the people to understand him. That they are at last compelled to do so is the proof of his authority.' And certainly, if you take from art its martyrdom, you will take from it its glory. It might still reflect the passing modes of mankind, but it would cease to reflect the face of God. (p.328; pp.207-8)

This manifesto for writing which is heterodox by the standards of its time recalls that attributed to Euripides in "The Theatre" (p.328; p.171): *Ideas of Good and Evil* creates links across periods even when describing the difficulties of recognising or establishing artistic authority.²⁹

Having celebrated the religion, the martyrdom and the glory of the artist, Yeats expands his consideration of faith rather optimistically to a broad national church to which his own conversion has been made:

If our craftsmen were to choose their subjects under what we may call, if we understand faith to mean that belief in a spiritual life which is not confined to one Church, the persuasion of their faith and their country, they would soon discover that although their choice seemed arbitrary at first, it had obeyed what was deepest in them. [...] It was years before I could rid myself of Shelley's Italian light, but now I think my style is myself. I might have found more of Ireland if I had written in Irish, but I have found a little, and I have found all myself. (p.329; p.208)

Style is the product of necessary struggle, and also needs a counterpart in national scholarship on national matters rather than about "German writers or about periods of Greek history", since "here in Ireland the spirit of man may be about to wed the spirit of the world". In this mode of criticism, of course, "periods" of history do have great importance, not as the objects of slavish study, but as ways of re-invigorating the imagination and imagining the future of art.

In spite of the concern for landscape and other obvious national subjects, Yeats finally advances an aesthetic formulation which retains mystery:

Art and scholarship like these I have described would give Ireland more than they received from her, for they would make love of the unseen more unshakable, more ready to plunge deep into the abyss, and they would make love of country more fruitful in the mind, more a

²⁹ "But in Athens, where so many intellectual traditions were born, Euripides once changed hostility to enthusiasm by asking his playgoers whether it was his business to teach them, or their business to teach him." (p.268).

part of daily life. One would know an Irish man into whose life they had come - and in a few generations they would come into the life of all, rich and poor - by something that would set him apart among men. He himself would understand that more was expected of him than of others because he had greater possessions. The Irish race would have become a chosen race, one of the pillars that uphold the world. (pp.331-2; p.210)

The synthesis seeks to draw art and life together, and for all the directions to education, the language is no less religious. Through appeals for this spiritual apprenticeship Yeats finally reaches a conclusion similar to that of "The Celtic Element in Literature", but with a greater insistence on difficulty and on artistic integrity, and, in the contrasting imagery, with a final goal of spiritual establishment rather than infusion.

The earlier essay begins with the redefinition of established strengths, the second with established failure. Both essays end with what Ireland can give to the world, with anticipation, but the second is more embattled and urgent. In both, a non-denominational religious sense pervades the affirmation of standards, and justifies freedom with notions of time and of national development. It seems to be essential for Yeats's rejection of provincialism that these two essays specifically on Ireland and the arts should imagine an imaginative expansion beyond Ireland, a potential community as broad as any in the volume. The unspoken principle, hinted at in the evocations of decline against which growth is demonstrated, is that Ireland must generate cultural history, since it cannot stay out of it. Perhaps more challenging is the implication that Ireland must attempt to perpetuate a synthesis of ancient and new. Yeats's use of myth and of mythic capacity as perpetually potential perhaps anticipates that of other modern writers. Michael Bell suggests that in the late nineteenth century,

mythopoeia, without losing its archaic overtones, became the paradigmatic capacity of the human mind. On this view, instead of myth being the early stage out of which the sophisticated intellectual disciplines of modern culture developed, it is rather the permanent ground on which they rest, or even the soil in which their roots are invisibly nourished.³⁰

Yeats is not immediately concerned with a great range of intellectual disciplines, but he does hope to include imaginative creativity, religion, and modes of life in his concerns. Bell's analysis applies to Yeats because these essays do seek to retain

³⁰ Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth: Belief and responsibility in the twentieth century* (Cambridge: C. U. P., 1997), p.16.

“archaic overtones” for modes of imaginative creativity, while demonstrating potentials, particularly for Ireland but perhaps also for any culture.

3. "Symbolism in Painting" and "The Symbolism of Poetry"

In *Ideas of Good and Evil* particular visual images and references to particular works of visual art provide recurrent illustrations, which are also performances, of symbolism. These touchstones are presented as offering the possibility of dazzling revelation and they are cited at crucial moments in the movements of the essays, suggesting pseudo-religious patterns and rituals in symbolist practice. Like the many quotations from Blake, they are deployed, or brandished extrovertly, where the arguments require substantial confirmation. The elaborate rhythmical gestures which introduce these synthesising symbols involve a combination of the connotations of Paterian meditation on art and of ritual magic. Visionary experiences are related as legitimate matter for critical discourse; rhythms of language are specifically linked to such visions. In Yeats's accounts of the communal imagination and of transhistorical memory, symbols are the matter of literary and folk traditions and the means by which they proceed. These exemplary visions, artworks and their artists provide the intersection between the broader notions of imaginative tradition and more specific areas in which tradition might operate. The functions of symbols as described and as demonstrated in *Ideas of Good and Evil* as a whole are illuminated in two essays placed together in the volume after the essay on Blake's illustrations, "Symbolism in Painting" and "The Symbolism of Poetry". The two essays can usefully be compared with Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*.³¹ Karl Beckson suggests that "The Symbolism of Poetry" was "less a review than an attempt to clarify Symbolism".³² Symons's book was dedicated to Yeats, as Yeats acknowledges in "The Symbolism of Poetry", but as well as clarification and Yeats's considerably more extravagant claims, some differences of emphasis are also evident.

"Symbolism in Painting" distinguishes between symbol and allegory, applies the opposition between the temporal and the eternal to allegory and symbolism with an invocation of the authority of Blake, and contrasts symbolism with "systematic" mysticism".³³ It articulates a formulation of symbolism which

³¹ (London: Heinemann, 1899).

³² Karl Beckson, *Arthur Symons, a Life* (Oxford: OUP, 1987), p.198.

³³ "Symbolism in Painting" was first published as the first two sections of the introduction to W T Horton's *A Book of Images* (1898). Yeats removed all references to Horton and made no acknowledgment in *Ideas of Good and Evil* of the initial publication. Horton's publisher Oldmeadow sought and received royalties, but Horton's personal disappointment soured his relationship with Yeats and damaged his confidence. Yeats's explained to Horton that he had not

encompasses most visual art, and advances the claims of an art which accommodates all symbolisms. Definition proves to be voracious; distinctions and associations are directed towards re-examination of principles of symbolic association. The symbolism of vision is recurrently related to ideas of time and the escape from it, and to evocations of a transcendent order which is partly replicated in mythological arrangements of symbolism. These forms of order are justified by the belief that the visible world has an order which relates to the invisible world. These cross-currents of reflection and representation are vehemently, though not necessarily lucidly, distinguished from those of allegory. Ultimately the connotations of vision are the guarantors of symbolism's more profound value, and vision draws the reader back to revelation which evades mundane time. For visual symbolism, as much as for symbolism presented in poetic rhythm as considered in the next essay, the process of explanation involves Yeats in further assiduous orchestrations of notions of time, and in constructions of continuous structures in which symbols of symbolism offer connections to yet further systems of communication and representation.

The essay begins with the inadequacy of definitions in Johnson's *Dictionary*, which fails to distinguish sufficiently between symbol and allegory, and turns to a more recent work of reference so as to turn back to definition of symbolism by a symbolic object:

It is only a very modern Dictionary that calls a Symbol 'the sign or representation of any moral thing by the images or properties of natural things,' which, though an imperfect definition, is not unlike 'The things below are as the things above' of the Emerald Tablet of Hermes! The Faery Queen and The Pilgrim's Progress have been so important in England that Allegory has overtopped Symbolism, and for a time has overwhelmed it in its own downfall. William Blake was perhaps the first modern to insist on a difference.³⁴ (pp.226-7; p.146)

Modern definition and English literary history have brought little progress, at best only a subdued reiteration of an ancient and perpetually potential approach to artistic creation. Like the exemplary artworks of Yeats's later poetry, the tablet offers a mode of representation and of definition of representation which is

acknowledged the source of any of the essays, as this tended "weaken the unity of a book". An acknowledgment was added to the second impression of *Ideas of Good and Evil. Letters III*, pp.211, 379, 380n; p.400. The repercussions of this matter are described in *W B Yeats and W T Horton: The Record of an Occult Friendship*, by George Mills Harper, (London: Macmillan, 1980), pp.55-6.

polemical and encompassing, rejecting the localised order of a dictionary in favour of a claim to absolute meaning. Symons also cites the Smaragdine tablet as a point of realisation which de Nerval reached through madness, and equates it with the systems of Boehme and Swedenborg.³⁵

Again Blake is the avatar of the revival, and others have followed, including “a German Symbolist” portrait painter in Paris, who follows Blake’s definitions without knowing Blake: the revival of symbolism is an irresistible result of a new phase of imaginative history encountered by experience rather than simply an aesthetic doctrine to be passed on. This endorsement of Blake involves a disingenuously forceful interpretation which adjusts Blake to become a central figure in modern symbolist aesthetics:

William Blake has written, ‘Vision or imagination’ - meaning symbolism by these words - ‘is a representation of what actually exists, really or unchangeably. Fable or Allegory is formed by the daughters of Memory.’³⁶ (p.227; p.146)

The painter’s distinction between allegory and symbolism is added to this Blakean one, contrasts instinct with knowledge, and stresses the untranslatability of symbolism into alternative forms:

Symbolism said things which could not be said so perfectly in any other way, and needed but a right instinct for its understanding; while Allegory said things which could be said as well, or better, in another way, and needed a right knowledge for its understanding. (p.227; p.146-7)

Yeats’s own additions to these distinctions are subtle, and place these definitions in a relation to traditions. The painter rejects some visual images, “because he thought such emblems were allegorical, and had their meaning by a traditional and not by a natural right”. Yeats’s modification crucially denies that distinction, yet makes accumulated and structured, even systematised, symbolism into the pre-eminent mode:

I said that the rose, and the lily, and the poppy were so married, by their colour and their odour, and their use, to love and purity and sleep, or to other symbols of love and purity and sleep, and had been so long

³⁴ Lanham identifies the dictionary as Webster’s, and suggests that Yeats could have encountered the phrase on the tablet in Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled* or Mathers’s *Kabbalah Unveiled*, among other sources, p.399n.

³⁵ Symons, p.30.

³⁶ Lanham (p.400n) notes that the Yeats-Ellis *Blake* (I p.307) glosses this passage from “A Vision of the Last Judgment”, and I reproduce this since it elucidates Yeats’s the distinctions which he tends to pass on to Blake in “Symbolism in Painting”: “A vision is, that is to say, a perception of the eternal symbols, about which the world is formed, while allegory is a memory of some natural event into which we read a spiritual meaning.”

a part of the imagination of the world, that a symbolist might use them to help out his meaning without becoming an allegorist. I think I quoted the lily in the hand of the angel in Rossetti's 'Annunciation,' and the lily in the jar in his 'Childhood of Mary Virgin,' and thought they made the more important symbols, the women's bodies, and the angels' bodies, and the clear morning light, take that place, in the great procession of Christian symbols, where they can alone have all their meaning and all their beauty. (pp.228-9; p.147)

Tradition and structure elevate symbolism by allowing it coherence, and both tradition and structure could perhaps be described as great processions in this analysis. Time itself is subordinated to artistic and processional ordering.

Further examples add another form of procession to the attributes of symbolism: "a hundred generations might write out what seemed the meaning of the one, and they would write different meanings, for no symbol tells all its meaning to one generation" (p.230; p.148). Symbolism allows and demands recurrent re-interpretation, artistic history is driven and enriched by the production of associations. However, these interpretations are immediately re-mystified, removed from narrative structure and logical context and endowed with occult connotations, and with an occult mode of connotation. Symbolism has its own modes of continuity and conversely its own modes of flux and instability through time.

Mundane causation is replaced in symbolism as in dream by the transformative power of imaginative desire, and the repetitions of the argument measure out a contrast between repetition as representation of mundane relations and repetition as representation of transcendent reality:

All art that is not mere story-telling, or mere portraiture, is symbolic, and has the purpose of those symbolic talismans which mediaeval magicians made with complex colours and forms, and bade their patients ponder over daily, and guard with holy secrecy; for it entangles, in complex colours and forms, a part of the Divine Essence. A person or a landscape that is a part of a story or a portrait, evokes but so much emotion as the story or the portrait can permit without loosening the bonds that make it a story or a portrait; but if you liberate a person or a landscape from the bonds of motives and their actions, causes and effects, and from all bonds but the bonds of your love, it will change under your eyes, and become a symbol of an infinite emotion, a perfected emotion, a part of the Divine Essence; for we love nothing but the perfect, and our dreams make all things perfect, that we may love them. (pp.230-1; pp.148-9)

The trance-like progression moves accordingly to symbols as the matter of religious and drug-induced trance, and then to a familiar catalogue of nineteenth

century poets and artists who differ from religious artists only “in having accepted all symbolisms”. So the constitution of the new age is synthetic and agglomerative, rather like these definitions of symbolism. In a further opposition, Yeats divides part of his own list of recent symbolists between fragmentary symbolists (Keats and Calvert) and those who set their symbols into a procession (Blake and Wagner). The distinction is that the work of the former allows the spectator’s (or presumably the reader’s) mind to return to mortal things, but the work of the latter pursues immortal associations. The latter artist is the systematic mystic, who, Yeats perhaps rather surprisingly asserts,

is not the greatest of artists, because his imagination is too great to be bounded by a picture or a song, and because only imperfection in a mirror of perfection, or perfection in a mirror of imperfection, delight our frailty. (p.233; p.150)

Yeats is not content with perfection, he qualifies his appreciation of a systematised order of representation to place the highest form of art at the intersection of mortal and immortal, and attributes this judgment to a common human aesthetic. Extreme aspiration is admired but, paradoxically, shown to be limited: Yeats is vacillating about accepting system, although he appreciates its order. He insists on retaining respect for system, though, and so has to resist an association between systematic mysticism and the mechanical enclosure in a system of representation which he attributes to allegory. The distinction is not entirely clear, but is partly justified by an immediate example of a systematic mystic who has transcended enclosure to achieve prediction and influence: Blake is “the chancleer of the new dawn” and the prescriptive critic whom Yeats again quotes, principally for the assertion that the “world of imagination is the world of Eternity”.³⁷

“Symbolism in Painting” ends with this emphasis on perpetually available and perpetually suggestive mystical vision. Rather like the alternations between the communal imagination as disordered and as ordered by a supernatural artist in “Magic”, the description of the world of vision suggests that it is without logical order, but has the kind of order through symbols which have been described above as the mode of the systematic mystic. However, such order as there is here is unwilling and can only be received:

³⁷ Symons also works through distinctions between different kinds of mystic and artist, describing systems in terms which Yeats would come to systematise: “this jumble of the perilous secrets in which wisdom is so often folly, and folly so often wisdom”, pp.25-6.

Every visionary knows that the mind's eye soon comes to see a capricious and variable world, which the eye cannot shape or change, though it can call it up and banish it again. I closed my eyes a moment ago, and a company of people in blue robes swept by me in a blinding light, and had gone before I had done more than see little roses embroidered on the hems of their robes, and confused, blossoming apple-boughs somewhere beyond them, and recognized one of the company by his square, black curling beard. I have often seen him; and one night a year ago, I asked him questions which he answered by showing me flowers and precious stones, of whose meaning I had no knowledge, and he seemed too perfected a soul for any knowledge that cannot be spoken in symbol or metaphor. (pp.235-6; pp.151-2)

Yeats's progression through the essay, with its proliferating classifications and oppositions, is itself a procession of relations which owes such order as it has to symbolic effect rather than logical arrangement. This defamiliarisation of relations is again enhanced by the play with modes of time and with tenses: an anecdote which is perpetually "a moment ago" to writer and reader relates an access to eternity. The conclusion offers one more antithesis, which examines the apparent mutability of the visionary world and the nature of time and vision:

Are he and his blue-robed companions, and their like, 'the Eternal realities' of which we are the reflection 'in the vegetable glass of nature,' or a momentary dream? To answer is to take sides in the only controversy in which it is greatly worth taking sides, and in the only controversy which may never be decided. (p.236; p.152)

Among the varieties of order which would govern interpretation in this analysis, we find a familiar combination of apparently incompatible schemes: the anticipated new age of symbolic revelation of the eternal, and imagination in perpetual conflict. However, the claims for symbolic orders should also allow us to read Yeats's literary histories, predictions and artistic hierarchies, indeed all of these temporal and taxonomic orders as symbolic rather than literal. These phases and processions dismiss all other modes of history of art except as misreadings to be opposed.

The companion essay, "The Symbolism of Poetry" responds to contemporary ideas of symbolism, particularly to Symons's book, and in doing so rejects unphilosophical and untheoretical approaches to art. The essay was first published in the *Dome* in April 1900, although parts of the second section of it were also culled from a letter which Yeats wrote to the *Dublin Daily Express* on 8th November 1898.³⁸ That letter was part of his ongoing exchange of views with

³⁸ *Letters* 2, pp.294-8, p.294n.

John Eglinton, and the careful orchestration of that exchange indicates some of the more practical aspects of Yeats's project to use journalism to discuss permanence and immortality in art: appealing to the standards of eternity certainly did not preclude choosing the right moment.³⁹ Within the essay as a whole, Yeats's enthusiasm for the creative role of philosophy and criticism and the enjoyment of dismissive and provocative poses recalls Wilde. He begins by quoting Symons's assertion, much like some of his own, that symbolism is to be found "in every great imaginative writer". So Yeats asserts the seriousness and the general relevance of his arguments immediately, and sets Symons's critical pronouncement, Wagner's laboriously constructed ideas, Goethe and the Pleiade, against alternative kinds of discourse which would discount them: journalism, dinner-table conversation, "formulas and generalizations", writing "without forethought and afterthought". The opposition is sustained by suggestion of the literary writer's potential and necessary knowledge about "the procreant waters of the soul where the breath first moved, or about the waters under the earth that are the life of passing things", which is not comprehended by the vulgarity of modern England. The failures of comprehension measure again the distance between the ease of transitory opinion and the necessary difficulty of drawing upon hidden, eternal sources. Philosophy and criticism are part of this access to sources, permitting inspiration which fulfils one need as they fulfil another:

And it has often been this philosophy, or this criticism, that has evoked their most startling inspiration, calling into outer life some portion of the divine life, of the buried reality, which could alone extinguish in the emotions what their philosophy or their criticism would extinguish in the intellect. They have sought for no new thing, it may be, but only to understand and to copy the pure inspiration of early times, but because the divine life wars upon our outer life, and must needs change its weapons and its movements as we change ours, inspiration has come to them in beautiful startling shapes. (p.240; pp.154-5)

Literary history is re-imagined here, first in the notion of extinction and then in that of temporal/eternal warfare. An original purity of inspiration is a model to be imitated and which cannot be imitated: newness is inevitable in a progression in which the artist realises in outer life a portion of the divine life. In a reversal of other formulations, this divine life must respond to the outer life. Priority is

³⁹ As the editors note, the editor, T. P. Gill, withheld the letter from publication at the time with Yeats's consent, anticipating AE's commentary, on the dispute between Yeats and Eglinton, which

obscured by complex mutuality of relations, and these relations are served by the indirections of symbolism rather than by logical and external modes of representation:

The scientific movement brought with it a literature, which was always tending to lose itself in externalities of all kinds, in opinion, in declamation, in picturesque writing, in word-painting, or in what Mr. Symons has called an attempt 'to build in brick and mortar inside the covers of a book'; and now writers have begun to dwell upon the element of evocation, of suggestion, upon what we call the symbolism in great writers. (pp.240-1; p.155)

Realisation of the divine life in art must not be a realisation of externals, but of a capacity to evoke, and the intermediary means of this are symbols. Yeats proceeds by opposition, including the obligatory critique of contemporary England, but here opposition means an understanding of a perpetual conflict.

Adding to "Symbolism in Painting" and the aggressively inclusive mode of commentary on symbolism therein, Yeats now proceeds to expand on "the continuous indefinable symbolism which is the substance of all style". And indefinable it certainly proves to be, except that it involves a unique combination of "colours and sounds and forms", and that it comprehends symbols as perfected metaphors. The mode of examination which we are assumed to be sharing with Yeats involves entry into "reverie", and though symbolism can be demonstrated by the association operative in individual lines, Yeats is insistent on extending this reverie to the associations gathered through whole works. Reverie and indefinability, suggestion and evocation are emphatically distinguished from imprecision. However, precision does not extend to Yeats's own quotation. He misquotes Burns's line "The wan moon sets behind the white wave":

There are no lines with more melancholy beauty than these by Burns -

'The white moon is setting behind the white wave,

And Time is setting with me, O!

and these lines are perfectly symbolical. Take from them the whiteness of the moon and of the wave, whose relation to the setting of Time is too subtle for the intellect, and you take from them their beauty.⁴⁰

(p.241; p.155)

was to be published in "Literary Ideals in Ireland", *Letters* III, p.294n.

⁴⁰ M J C Hodgart notes that Yeats was not alone in his misreading: Burns's lines had also been altered by successive editors, and Carlyle in his essay on Burns had described his misquotation "The pale moon is setting beyond the white wave," as displaying a "clearness of sight we have called the foundation of all talent". Hodgart, "Misquotation as Re-Creation", *Essays in Criticism* 3.1 (Jan 1953), 28-38.

For all the breadth of speculation in his account of the sources of symbolism, Yeats is at pains to stress the integrity of symbol and of what it evokes as the creative achievement of integrity from disparity:

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their pre-ordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions; and when sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become as it were one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion. (p.243; p.156-7)

With this affirmation of the evocative power over the imagination of accumulated associations and various relations which have attained unity in artistic arrangement, Yeats launches an interpretation of the modes in which imaginative activity takes place.

The same relation exists between all portions of every work of art, whether it be an epic or a song, and the more perfect it is, and the more various and numerous the elements that have flowed into its perfection, the more powerful will be the emotion, the power, the god it calls among us. (pp.243-4; p.157)

An apparent scepticism which concentrates briefly on realisation and on the limitations on what could generate influence, permits a process through enveloping associations which claims ubiquitous association between all imaginative activities:

Because an emotion does not exist, or does not become perceptible or active among us, till it has found its expression, in colour or in sound or in form, or in all of these, and because no two modulations or arrangements of these evoke the same emotion, poets and painters and musicians, and in a less degree because their effects are momentary, day and night and cloud and shadow, are continually making and unmaking mankind. (p.244; p.157)

The power of imaginative influence generated by symbolism is not restricted within the form of symbolist art or the immediate experience of a spectator or reader, it reaches out in all modes of influence on human life, including natural influences. This mapping of the proliferating possibilities of influence is clearly similar to that in "Magic", as is the re-ordering of conventional priorities which follows. Both perform the accumulation and interrelation which they attribute to symbolism. The succeeding account describes spiritual history as disproportionate and mysterious. Communication and community are effected by "musical relation":

It is indeed only those things which seem useless or very feeble that have any power, and all those things that seem useful or strong, armies, moving wheels, modes of architecture, modes of government, speculations of the reason, would have been a little different if some mind long ago had not given itself to some emotion, as a woman gives herself to her lover, and shaped sounds or colours or forms, or all of these, into a musical relation, that their emotion might live in other minds. A little lyric evokes an emotion, and this emotion gathers others about it and melts into their being in the making of some great epic; and at last, needing an always less delicate body, or symbol, as it grows more powerful, it flows out, with all it has gathered, among the blind instincts of daily life, where it moves a power within powers, as one sees ring within ring in the stem of an old tree. [...] and I am certainly never certain, when I hear of some war, or of some religious excitement, or of some new manufacture, or of anything else that fills the ear of the world, that it has not all happened because of something that a boy piped in Thessaly. (p.245; pp.157-8)

This may be the same figure as the shepherd boy in “Magic” (p.50; p.41). Yeats puts this emphasis on connecting relationships, working in similar ways between elements of art and between art and its audience, in effect countering the tendency for symbolism to suggest only poetry of isolated essences.

In the review, “Three Irish Poets”, Yeats offered a racial scheme for the unlikely influences which change the world: “It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the spiritual history of the world has been the history of conquered races”.⁴¹ In spite of Yeats’s undervaluation of previous writers on the Celtic imagination in “The Celtic Movement in Literature”, this mode of seeing the imagination as an inversion of power relations and as a compensation for them might be traced back to Renan’s principles:

Imaginative power is nearly always proportionate to concentration of feeling, and lack of the external development of life [...] It is thus that little peoples dowered with imagination revenge themselves on their conquerors. Feeling themselves to be strong inwardly and weak outwardly, they protest, they exult; and such a strife unloosing their might, renders them capable of miracles. Nearly all great appeals to the supernatural are due to peoples hoping against all hope. [...] Israel in humiliation dreamed of the spiritual conquest of the world, and that dream has come to pass.⁴²

A similar contrast of spiritual and imaginative with temporal power informs the revision of power relations which recurs through *Ideas of Good and Evil*. It allows

⁴¹ “Three Irish Poets”, first published in the *Irish Homestead* Dec 1897; *Uncollected Prose* 2, p.70.

⁴² Ernest Renan, *The Poetry of the Celtic Races and other Studies*, trans. William S Hutchison (London: Scott, 1896), pp.2-25; reprinted in *Poetry and Ireland Since 1800: a Source Book* (London & New York: Routledge, 1988) ed. by Mark Storey, pp.54-60, pp.58-9.

the author an implicit authority, since as a poet he has an insight into significant forms of power, and into ideal forms of nationalism. Yeats's revision of historical causality can also offer Ireland priority over England and the utilitarianism which Yeats repeatedly associated with England.

Yeats's revision of causal relations in this essay is affirmed with a similarly extreme confidence, in spite of the apparent diffidence and commitment only to uncertainty. In this account, humanity is directed by "the emotions that have come to solitary men in moments of poetical contemplation", and common human emotions are refined and shaped by the poet "and his shadow the priest". The poet, then, both receives and fashions, perceives and creates, and again Blake is the authority for this complex role. Shadows, mirrors and influences are combined in a prose style which insists that development and change are continual: "for unless we believe that outer things are the reality, we must believe that the gross is the shadow of the subtle, that things are wise before they become foolish, and secret before they cry out in the market-place". These changes suggest that art and thought re-make the world, but also that it may be possible to imagine symbols so as to alter power, even to reverse the subjection of a nation by re-imagining it. One of the attractions of Yeats's anticipated new age of imaginative community is that under its new dispensation, temporal power may come to recognise imaginative power, spiritual history will be accepted as significant history.

Yeats moves suddenly from one occult idea to another, trance, and from this to a more technical aspect of poetic theory, rhythm. The alternation within the essay is itself a demonstration of the function of rhythm in providing formal control. After affirming the power of the moments of contemplation experienced by a solitary few, he expounds a theory of the contemplative functions of rhythm which continues the themes of the previous section by again merging creation and reception, and tracing imaginative influence as unmotivated and irrational:

The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me, is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols. [...] I have heard in meditation voices that were forgotten the moment they had spoken; and I have been swept, when in more profound meditation, beyond all memory but of those things that came from beyond the threshold of waking life. I was writing once a very symbolical and abstract poem,

when my pen fell on the ground; and as I stooped to pick it up, I remembered some phantastic adventure that yet did not seem phantastic, and then another like adventure, and when I asked myself when these things had happened, I found that I was remembering my dreams for many nights. (p.248; p.159-60)

With the harnessing of time which is poetic rhythm comes a liberation from normal time, from “waking life”, and an access to an alternative imaginative life. The anecdote performs a displacement into another kind of time, a displacement similar to that which it describes. The shift in subject from the previous section is not as great as it initially appears: the release of symbols from contemplation, assisted by rhythm, is another kind of creation from internal resources. Both for the poet and the reader, rhythm offers access to symbolism which is described here in traditional symbols:

So I think that in the making and in the understanding of a work of art, and the more easily if it is full of patterns and symbols and music, we are lured to the threshold of sleep, and it may be far beyond it, without knowing that we have ever set our feet upon the steps of horn or of ivory. (p.249; p.160)

To these emotional symbols Yeats adds another category, intellectual symbols, but still stresses association and accumulation rather than examining symbols in isolation. These further associations supply order even as they add further images, and the intellect is charged with responsibility for discovering autonomous coherence in symbolism. This is not the most coherent section of the essay, but it does suggest that intellectual associations determine a reader's capacity to perceive symbolic structure, and this structure is again given the connotations of ritual and of movement.

It is the intellect that decides where the reader shall ponder over the procession of the symbols, and if the symbols are merely emotional, he gazes from amid the accidents and destinies of the world; but if the symbols are intellectual too, he becomes himself a part of pure intellect, and he is himself mingled with the procession. (p.251; p.161)

The essays in this volume establish new associations between different areas of experience and between different kinds of tradition, but the experience of art as a new kind of association between people and orders of symbolism lies behind all of the other relations.

Shakespeare represents an example of the first, worldly, mode, Dante of the transcendental, systematised, second. The second is also a mode of withdrawal from external stimuli, and in the present phase of the world it has no established role, it can only become anticipation of a forthcoming change. Here the prediction

of a new phase is accommodated into a more sophisticated account of symbolical relations than in any other essay in *Ideas of Good and Evil*. This new phase is necessarily anticipated by intellect, and in an progressively anticipatory sentence Yeats ultimately claims this intellect must become ritualised and religious:

But being of our time, he [Gérard de Nerval] has been like Maeterlinck, like Villiers de l'Isle Adam in *Axël*, like all who are preoccupied with intellectual symbols in our time, a foreshadower of the new sacred book, of which all the arts, as somebody has said, are beginning to dream, and because, as I think, they cannot overcome the slow dying of men's hearts that we call the progress of the world, and lay their hands on men's heart-strings again, without becoming the garment of religion as in old times. (p.253; pp.162-3)⁴³

This acceptance of religious responsibilities and the earlier intimations of ritual recall the end of Symons's introduction:

Here, then, in this revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition; in the endeavour to disengage the ultimate essence, the soul, of whatever exists and can be realised by the consciousness; in this dutiful waiting upon every symbol by which the soul of things can be made visible; literature, bowed down by so many burdens, may at last attain liberty, and its authentic speech. In attaining this liberty, it accepts a heavier burden; for in speaking to us so intimately, so solemnly, as only religion had hitherto spoken to us, it becomes itself a kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual.⁴⁴

However, Symons's emphasis on disengagement in the preface to a book which tends to stress the isolated lives and the idiosyncratic quests of symbolist writers may be contrasted with Yeats's efforts to relate symbolism to imaginative communities. Both show a debt to Pater in their cumulative progressions towards sustained accounts of symbolism, but Yeats is less consistent, he allows his doctrines more extravagant expression, he imagines more sweeping spiritual histories and revisions of history, and he credits symbolism with a much greater capacity to remake the world than does Symons. Symons touches on pseudo-religious ritual, but Yeats, although he propagates mystery more actively than Symons, uses the religious connotations to include and even institutionalise the otherwise dangerously isolated symbolist poet, providing status and a social role. Yeats continued to vacillate on this point, but certainly also continued to allow

⁴³ Editions from 1924 on read "...to dream. How can the arts overcome the slow dying of men's hearts that we call the progress of the world, and lay their hands upon men's heart-strings again, without becoming the garment of religion as in old times." Lanham, p.425n. Personal belief becomes embattled rhetorical challenge in the later version.

⁴⁴ Symons, pp.8-9.

more potential community than did Symons, including the community with past exponents of all modes of symbolism.

The final section of "The Symbolism of Poetry" seeks to draw conclusions for contemporary poetry, beginning with Yeats's usual strictures on the heterogeneous content of Victorian poetry and on vehement opinion in poetry. The new phase should reject any direct link between poetry and action, and this is imagined in terms of rhythm. The will to mundane action should be replaced by an evasion of the immediate, even of time:

With this change of substance, this return to imagination, this understanding that the laws of art, which are the hidden laws of the world, can alone bind the imagination, would come a change of style, and we would cast out of serious poetry those energetic rhythms, as of a man running, which are the invention of the will with its eyes always on something to be done or undone; and we would seek out those wavering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination, that neither desires nor hates, because it has done with time, and only wishes to gaze upon some reality, some beauty; nor would it be any longer possible for anybody to deny the importance of form, in all its kinds, for although you can expound an opinion, or describe a thing when your words are not quite well chosen, you cannot give a body to something that moves beyond the senses, unless your words are as subtle, as complex, as full of mysterious life, as the body of a flower or a woman. (pp.254-5; pp.163-4)

Like other versions of spiritual change, this "return to imagination" must be imagined into being. Again, the products of poetic artifice are compared as equals with natural creations. The conclusion evades precision, stressing the importance of "perfections that escape analysis, the subtleties that have a new meaning every day": symbolic poetry establishes a perpetually creative and changing relation with time. It may apparently also learn from traditions of action, perceived in legendary terms, rather than from present action.

The form of sincere poetry, unlike the form of the popular poetry, may indeed be sometimes obscure, or ungrammatical as in some of the best of the Songs of Innocence and Experience, but it must have the perfections which escape analysis, the subtleties that have a new meaning every day, and it must have all this whether it be but a little song made out of a moment of dreamy indolence, or some great epic made out of the dreams of one poet and of a hundred generations whose hands were never weary of the sword. (p.255-6; p.164)⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Michael Bell reads this reading of Blake as indicative of Yeats's consciousness of his own use of "linguistic peculiarity", particularly the conflicts between "syntactical logic" and "rhetorical movement", p.54.

4. "The Happiest of the Poets" and "At Stratford-on-Avon"

In comparison with the versions of literary history which are employed in the essays on Blake and on Shelley, and with the other explorations of the origins of poetry, the literary history in the essays on Morris and on Shakespeare may initially seem relatively unambitious. These pieces do not move with quite the same sweeping and inclusive gestures; they are more contingent, and deploy their versions of history and of eternity with more tact to produce more sophisticated complexes. Yet they do build on the modes of analysis which I have considered, and do so with an assured control of the same combinations of aesthetics with idiosyncratic historicism. They also find such historicism in the works of their subjects. The essays develop versions of their subjects partly through concentration on limitations: in Morris's case, limitations in his ability to create a full vision; in Shakespeare's, limitations produced in the English by the historical development of utilitarianism. These two English predecessors were crucial for Yeats for different reasons than were Blake and Shelley. Morris had been an early personal influence on Yeats, on his notions of the social and national functions of art, in his uses of history in imagining these functions, and had shared some common nineteenth century poetic problems. Shakespeare is obviously a daunting figure for poets to measure themselves against, but in this essay Shakespeare offers Yeats an opportunity for describing and for distancing himself from the English through poetic perceptions of history: Yeats combines his own use of contextual history with the perceptions of historical phase which he finds dramatised in Shakespeare's plays. In both essays, Yeats exercises a mode of manipulation of spiritual and national history which he had been honing throughout this period in order to select from and to place his models. In "The Happiest of the Poets" and in "At Stratford-on-Avon" he uses phases and ideas of time and change to construct oppositions and inter-relations of nature and artifice, life, reality and unreality. From these oppositions he creates divisions, and from an approach rich in apparent diversions he reverts to the present to organise a selected version of the legacies of his subjects.

In "The Happiest of the Poets" Yeats gives little attention to Morris's ideals, in contrast with the accounts of Blake and of Shelley, or to his specific

political projects.⁴⁶ Instead he credits Morris with an appreciation of physical life, denying him extreme poetic vision until the end, when such vision is internalised into a modified guarantee of poetic capacity and when Morris has been wholly transformed by Yeatsian terms. Yeats's own personal memories of hearing and reading Morris's poetry endorse this. The essay begins with a characterisation of Rossetti, to whom Morris will be compared. Rossetti's desire was for "impossible purities", "as though the last judgment had already begun in his mind and that the essences and powers, which the divine hand had mixed into one another to make the loam of life, fell asunder at his touch".⁴⁷ Perhaps unsurprisingly Rossetti's genius is then aligned with Shelley's, and particularly with Yeats's Shelley in that he found temporal happiness impossible and would have been "among those who would have prayed in old times in some chapel of the Star". The image is one of those which draws *Ideas of Good and Evil* together, and indeed without the more sustained version of it in "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" this image would be unintelligible. The "divine hand" also alerts us to Browning's "Essay on Shelley", probably Yeats's most important example of a poet placing his own aesthetic in relation to an idiosyncratic characterisation of a precursor. In contrast to Rossetti and Shelley, Morris was capable of happiness because he placed his ideal in "the image of a perfect fullness of natural life, of an Earthly Paradise", "among the worshippers of natural abundance". Morris's version of the Grail was a temporal one which gave "every man his chosen food", not one of religion or passion. This dominant concern with earthly happiness allows Yeats to suggest that Morris could never sympathise with unhappy people, and to indulge in sentences which accumulate into a placid reverie over quotations and images of happiness from Morris's work. Morris's vision is thus less comprehensive than Blake's "absorbing vision of the happy and the unhappy", and although this reverie has its share of admiration, it suggests some limitations:

It is as though Nature spoke through him at all times in the mood that is upon her when she is opening the apple-blossom or reddening the apple or thickening the shadow of the boughs, and that the men and

⁴⁶ First published in the *Fortnightly Review*, 18th March 1903, although Yeats had completed it by mid-1902.

⁴⁷ The Last Judgment recurs as a mental event in "The Death of Synge", *Autobiographies*, p. 511. More generally, the personal, internalised self-judgment was to become an increasingly important valuation of artistic personality for Yeats, for instance when adapted to the depiction of Lionel Johnson in "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory".

women of his verse and of his stories are all the ministers of her mood.
(p.81; p.59)

Poetic transformation was merely immature, as if in a mode of autobiographical development, and safely domesticated for Morris:

Indeed all he writes seems to me like the make-believe of a child who is remaking the world, not always in the same way, but always after its own heart; and so unlike all other modern writers he makes his poetry out of unending pictures of a happiness that is often what a child would imagine, and always a happiness that sets mind and body at ease.
(p.83; pp.60-1)

Where not founded entirely on aesthetics, Morris's politics are limited to a childish innocence, generosity and natural abundance. His concern with communal value is undermined by the terms in which his beliefs and aims are restricted to charming individual qualities, even quirks. However, this preoccupation with happiness is not a total limitation, since it is allowed to function as one restricted mode of poetic idealism. In a passage of rather fine distinctions, Morris's aesthetics alone allowed him to achieve vision and prophecy:

In other words, his mind was illuminated from within and lifted into prophecy in the full right sense of the word, and he saw the natural things he was alone gifted to see in their perfect form; and having that faith which is alone worth having, for it includes all others, a sure knowledge established in the constitution of his mind that perfect things are final things, he announced that all he had seen would come to pass. [...] And if we had not enough artistic feeling, enough feeling for the perfect that is, to admit the authority of the vision; or enough faith to understand that all that is imperfect passes away, he would not, as I think, have argued with us in a serious spirit. (pp.86-7; pp.62-3)

His community of interest with Yeats is in "artistic feeling... feeling for the perfect", the same rather imprecise idealism which Yeats sees as the root of national artistic education and as the essence of effective symbolism elsewhere in *Ideas of Good and Evil*. The conclusion to the piece allows a grand imaginative resurgence to this selected version of Morris, issuing in a particularly extravagant symbol of symbolical imaginative change. In this resurgence, Morris is permitted to join communities, first a priesthood of art and then, presumably of general imaginative rebirth. After qualifications, Morris is allowed to share in aesthetic apocalypse, and his biography seems to be adapted to the progress of Yeats's essay:

He knew clearly what he was doing towards the end, for he lived at a time when poets and artists have begun again to carry the burdens that priests and theologians took from them angrily some few hundred years ago. His art was not essentially more religious than Rossetti's art,

but it was different, for Rossetti, drunken with natural beauty, saw the supernatural beauty, the impossible beauty, in his frenzy, while he being less intense and more tranquil would show us a beauty that would wither if it did not set us at peace with natural things, and if we did not believe that it existed always a little, and would some day exist in its fullness. He may not have been, indeed he was not, among the very greatest of the poets, but he was among the greatest of those who prepare the last reconciliation when the Cross shall blossom with roses. (p.89; p.64)

With this decorative revelation, encapsulated in a favourite symbol of Yeats's, Morris becomes primarily an example to illustrate a Yeatsian symbolic movement. We have come a long way from Morris's concerns with contemporary England. Future change has been separated from the social and political connotations which Morris would have ascribed to it, and a version of Morris has been brought into a present, continuing, but less temporal phasal development. It is only through joining this aesthetic cause that Morris is allowed to contribute to his successors, to leave a heritage which can be shared and active. A comparison with Yeats's own 1896 review of Morris's *The Well at the World's End* demonstrates the modifications which Yeats performed to produce this reading of Morris.⁴⁸ Some of the same terms occur in that review:

Almost alone among the dreamers of our time, he accepted life and called it good; and because almost alone among them he saw, amid its incompleteness and triviality, the Earthly Paradise that shall bloom at the end of the ages.⁴⁹

The notable additions are the inclusion of Morris into a group of artists constituting a movement, the fact that his art is now not only perceiving but creating an apocalypse, and the greater exuberance of the final synthetic symbol. Whereas initially in "The Happiest of the Poets" Morris's happiness had been contrasted with the perception which was Rossetti's mental last judgment, he is now allowed to contribute to something similar as a predicted communal development. In terms of symbolic art, these antitheses are negotiated and contained in a synthetic symbol of symbolic synthesis. Yeats has not abandoned apocalyptic imagery, but has moved beyond it to a stage where he is able to invoke, adopt, contextualise and manipulate it relatively easily. The essay is not only another example of Yeats's forceful enclosure of a writer in his own very idiosyncratic terms: it is also significant because elsewhere Yeats manipulates Morris's characterisations of eras

⁴⁸ In the *Bookman*, November 1896. *UP* 1, pp.418-420.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p.419.

of history and of shifts between them in arranging the work of other poets as well. Morris provides a source for images of an unspoilt “Merry England”, of careless joyful art responsive to place and origin. The emphasis on naive happiness allows Yeats to extend carelessness to support art’s independence, where desirable, from some political causes. The separation of vision from temporal aims is also a guarantee of autonomy, both for ideal poetry and for the poet assembling this critical standard. The formulations of this essay demonstrate Yeats’s assured assimilation of Morris into his critical practice.

“At Stratford-on-Avon” opens with an apparently casual allusion to Morris:⁵⁰

I have been hearing Shakespeare as the traveller in *News from Nowhere* might have heard him, had he not been hurried back into our noisy time. One passes through quiet streets, where gabled and red-tiled houses remember the Middle Age, to a theatre that has been made not to make money, but for the pleasure of making it, like the market-houses that set the traveller chuckling; nor does one find it among hurrying cabs and ringing pavements, but in a green garden by a river side. (p.142; p.96)

As literary or even as dramatic criticism, this anecdotal register seems fanciful. However, this opening also performs a conflation of temporal perspectives by alluding to an evocation of an ideal past in a novel which actually projects that ideal into the future as a recreation of beauty. The scene described seems to be an ideal chronotope, immune from progress and change, but Yeats’s interest in it lies in the fact that in Stratford it is an achievement of art and of an audience for art. He describes it in terms of a fictional description of an ideal relation between art and life. The capacity of art to create its own ideal relation to time is both declared and demonstrated here.

The holiday atmosphere, immune from the temporal interruptions of the newspapers, then prepares for the appreciation of the “unearthly energy” of Shakespeare’s history plays “in their right order”. Yeats’s stress on this order resembles the visionary structures of symbols in several of these essays, particularly since this is credited with producing a dream-like state. His comments on stage design emphasise that “our art of the stage is the art of making a succession of pictures”. The “strange procession of kings and queens” then calls up recollections of another place, with a peculiar relation to mundane reality. The

⁵⁰ First published in two parts in the *Speaker*, 11th and 18th May 1901.

theatrical experience links places, and then links to a time of unrestricted imagination:

I have felt as I have sometimes felt on grey days on the Galway shore, when a faint mist has hung over the grey sea and the grey stones, as if the world might suddenly vanish and leave nothing behind, not even a little dust under one's feet. The people my mind's eye has seen have too much of the extravagance of dreams, like all the inventions of art before our crowded life had brought moderation and compromise, to seem more than a dream, and yet all else has grown dim before them. (p.144; p.97)

The "high dream" of this art is shared in discussion and is set against the "moment's choice" of London conversation which builds up mere "social unity": art in Stratford is, because of its enchanting effects, closer to rural Ireland than to London. Yeats seems to be determined to oppose the ephemerality which might be expected to be a quality of a theatre review. London, and even "the world", are inimical to the arts, which survive by "bitter hatred" of such distractions from a pseudo-religious dedication, and from places where art has created or conditions have preserved an enriching imaginative community. This dedication seeks to escape the world, with a polemical determination set against the cultivation of temporal and temporary opinions and the pseudo-communities they create:

We would escape, too, from those artificial tastes and interests we cultivate, that we may have something to talk about among people we meet for a few minutes and not again, and the arts would grow as serious as the Ten Commandments. (p.147; p.99)

The passages of the essay on dramatic presentation are informed by Yeats's own interests and projects as an innovative dramatist, and naturalistic scene-painting is also rejected as "not an art, but a trade". Yeats's visual principles here depend on a conception of the functions of consistent convention:

As we cannot, it seems, go back to the platform and the curtain, and the argument for doing so is not without weight, we can only get rid of the sense of unreality, which most of us feel when we listen to the conventional speech of Shakespeare, by making scenery as conventional. Time after time his people use at some moment of deep emotion an elaborate or deliberate metaphor, or do some improbable thing which breaks an emotion of reality we have imposed upon him by an art that is not his, nor in the spirit of his. It also is an essential part of his method to give slight or obscure motives of many actions that our attention may dwell on what is of chief importance, and we set these cloudy actions among solid-looking houses, and what we hope are solid-looking trees, and illusion comes to an end, slain by our desire to increase it. (pp.150-1; p.101)

As in “The Theatre” and in his strictures on the speaking of verse, Yeats places emphasis on convention in opposition to naturalism of representation, and as in those comments there is more at issue than immediate effect. These principles are founded on another formulation of the conditions of art, as art “brings us near to the archetypal ideas themselves, and away from nature, which is but their looking-glass”. Yeats cites an authority for these principles: “Goethe has said, ‘Art is art, because it is not nature!’”, although as Lanham notes, Yeats here fuses several of Goethe’s ideas into his own aphorism.⁵¹

Yeats then turns to Balzac to lead into his manifesto for an aesthetic which reaches past the “momentary self” in contrast to temporal utilitarian art and criticism. The diatribe against didactic utilitarianism is another plea, like those in “Magic” and in “The Symbolism of Poetry” for thoughts which seem to have no temporal power:

It did not occur to the critics that you cannot know a man from his actions because you cannot watch him in every kind of circumstance, and that men are made useless to the State as often by abundance as by emptiness, and that a man’s business may at times be revelation, not reformation. Fortinbras was, it is likely enough, a better king than Hamlet would have been, Aufidius was a more reasonable man than Coriolanus, Henry V was a better man-at-arms than Richard II, but, after all, were not those others who had changed nothing for the better and many things for the worse greater in the Divine Hierarchies? (pp.154-5; p.103)⁵²

This extraordinary rhetorical question negotiates the problem raised by scorning standards of judgment while making a judgment, and Yeats follows it with an allusion to Blake. As so often, Blake is an enabling influence for Yeats’s literary system-making, and does not need to be divided or enclosed and controlled as much as other influences. This diatribe against utilitarianism leads into the central opposition of the essay: that between Richard II and Henry V. With this comes the critique of Shakespeare criticism as “a vulgar worshipper of success”, a fault which has apparently grown worse through modernity:

I have turned over many books in the library at Stratford-on-Avon, and I have found in nearly all an antithesis, which grew in clearness and violence as the century grew older, between two types, whose representatives were Richard II, ‘sentimental,’ ‘weak,’ ‘selfish,’ ‘insincere,’ and Henry V, ‘Shakespeare’s only hero.’ These books took

⁵¹ Lanham, p.314n.

⁵² The reformation/revelation contrast reappears in more exuberant fashion in Paul’s sermon in *Where There is Nothing*, *VPlays*, p.1139.

the same delight in abasing Richard II that school-boys do in persecuting some boy of fine temperament, who has weak muscles and a distaste for school games. [...] I cannot claim any minute knowledge of these books, but I think that these emotions began among the German critics, who perhaps saw something French and Latin in Richard II, and I know that Professor Dowden, whose book I once read carefully, first made these emotions eloquent and plausible. He lived in Ireland, where everything has failed, and he meditated frequently upon the perfection of character which had, he thought, made England successful, for, as we say, 'cows beyond the water have long horns.' (pp.155-6; pp.103-4)

This race conflict theory of critical history is also employed in Yeats's introduction to Spenser, and is a parallel to the England/Ireland contrasts which run through *Ideas of Good and Evil*. It is perhaps indicative of Yeats's confidence in this mode that he is prepared to accuse others of taking a part for the whole. A brief reference to Pater (p.158; p.105) in the description of Richard is significant: Yeats's character summary of Richard is similar to Pater's, but Pater sees Richard as the supreme example of the conflict between man and role which he finds in all of Shakespeare's kings.⁵³ Yeats takes aspects of this description, but introduces the opposition with Henry V, which then becomes a historical opposition between a fading phase and its successor. In effect, Shakespeare becomes a Yeatsian system-maker, perceiving and making into art the conflicting phases of national, spiritual and cultural development: Yeats then rejects the notion that Shakespeare would have subscribed to utilitarian assessments of character. By way of refutation, he credits Shakespeare with sympathy for Richard, illustrating it partly by way of an anecdote about the dying Verlaine:

To suppose that Shakespeare preferred the men who deposed his King is to suppose that Shakespeare judged men with the eyes of a Municipal Councillor weighing the merits of a Town Clerk; and that had he been by when Verlaine cried out from his bed, 'Sir, you have been made by the stroke of a pen, but I have been made by the breath of God,' he would have thought the Hospital Superintendent the better man. (p.158-9; p.105)

The contrast between these two value-systems is then re-inserted into history:

The courtly and saintly ideals of the Middle Ages were fading, and the practical ideals of the modern age had begun to threaten the unuseful dome of the sky; Merry England was fading, and yet it was not so faded that the poets could not watch the procession of the world with that untroubled sympathy for men as they are, as apart from all

⁵³ Walter Pater, *Appreciations* (London: Macmillan, 1889), "Shakespeare's English Kings", pp.192-212, p.196.

they do and seem, which is the substance of tragic irony. (pp.159-60; p.106)

T. McAlindon commented on Yeats's manipulations of Morris and the possible influences of Nietzsche in this essay, although he tends to attribute excessive unity and cohesion to Yeats's emergent aristocratic aesthetic ideal. His analysis of these influences on antitheses is particularly apt:

Morris, however, was responsible for a certain ambiguity in Yeats's early attitude to Renaissance literature.[...] For him the Renaissance was the end of the Middle Ages and so was misnamed; and his awareness of the terrible disintegration which the period heralded compelled him to look upon it with anger and dismay. Until 1904, therefore, "Renaissance" was a pejorative term with Yeats, signifying the element of corrupting modernism in the splendid work of Spenser and Shakespeare. Nevertheless Yeats could not at this time bring himself to share Morris's preference of Chaucer to Shakespeare. Indeed Morris, in stressing the tragic and antithetical nature of Shakespeare's time, had rendered it all the more fascinating to Yeats.⁵⁴

For Yeats, Shakespeare's perception of tragedy shows up the failures of Dowden and other critics, and also of the English nineteenth century in general. The rejection of measurement recurs to demonstrate this. Shakespeare

had no nice sense of utilities, no ready balance to measure deeds, like that fine instrument, with all the latest improvements, Gervinus and Professor Dowden handle so skilfully. He meditated as Solomon, not as Bentham meditated, upon blind ambitions, untoward accidents, and capricious passions, and the world was almost as empty in his eyes as it must be in the eyes of God. (pp.160-1; pp.106-7)

Shakespeare is permitted a total vision which Yeats allows to few. In an astonishing reading which revises a series of modes of valuation, Yeats constructs his own cosmic critical play with a succession of oppositions and enclosures. He watches Shakespeare creating a single myth in a sequence of plays which forms another procession. That procession watches and reassesses reassess one play, and within that one the whole structure deconstructs an ephemeral rhetoric which is then equated with the ephemeral impure discourse of modern life:

The Greeks, a certain scholar has told me, considered that myths are the activities of the Daemons, and that the Daemons shape our characters and our lives. I have often had the fancy that there is some one Myth for every man, which, if we but knew it, would make us understand all he did and thought. Shakespeare's Myth, it may be, describes a wise man who was blind from very wisdom, and an empty man who thrust him from his place, and saw all that could be seen from very emptiness. It is in the story of Hamlet, who saw too great

⁵⁴ T. McAlindon, "Yeats and the English Renaissance", *PMLA* Vol LXXXII No.2, (May 1967) 157-169, p.158.

issues everywhere to play the trivial game of life, and of Fortinbras, who came from fighting battles about 'a little patch of ground' so poor that one of his Captains would not give 'six ducats' to 'farm it,' and who was yet acclaimed by Hamlet and by all as the only befitting King. And it is in the story of Richard II, that unripened Hamlet, and of Henry V, that ripened Fortinbras. To poise character against character was an element in Shakespeare's art, and scarcely a play is lacking in characters that are the complement of one another, and so, having made the vessel of porcelain Richard II, he had to make the vessel of clay Henry V. He makes him the reverse of all that Richard was. [...] instead of that lyricism which rose out of Richard's mind like a fountain to fall again where it had risen, instead of that phantasy too enfolded in its own sincerity to make any thought the hour has need of, Shakespeare has given him a resounding rhetoric that moves men, as a leading article does to-day. (pp.161-3; pp.107-8)

The grand perspective of the tragedian and of an ideal poet is again equated with an eternal scale as opposed to an immediate one. Yeats is describing an oeuvre which contrasts registers, and registers contrasts, to compare personalities and modes of vision. This one myth is actually the one myth of *Ideas of Good and Evil*: that of a timeless artistic imagination perpetually threatened and obstructed by ephemeral utilitarianism. The self-delighting language of Richard II is considered to have a different temporal quality to the utilitarianism of Henry and of English criticism.⁵⁵ There is a parallel between the self-delight of the character and the grand perspective of the tragedian who achieves a poetic language which registers success and failure without any hasty concern for the distinction between them.

His [Henry's] purposes are so intelligible to everybody that every body talks of him as if he succeeded, although he fails in the end, as all men great and little fail in Shakespeare, and yet his conquests abroad are made nothing by a woman made warrior, and that boy he and Katherine were to 'compound,' 'half French, half English,' 'that' was to 'go to Constantinople and take the Turk by the beard,' turns out a Saint, and loses all his father had built up at home and his own life.

Shakespeare watched Henry V, not indeed as he watched the greater souls in the visionary procession, but cheerfully, as one watches some handsome spirited horse, and he spoke his tale, as he spoke all tales, with tragic irony. (pp.163-4; pp. 108-9)

"Tragic irony" recurs as an appropriately unaltered refrain. The "Daemons", the one myth and the procession through types of contemplative, conqueror and saint

⁵⁵ The image of the fountain recurs: Yeats describes reading Blake as feeling "the spray of an inexhaustible fountain of beauty" ("William Blake and the Imagination", p.172); the image is also applied to Shelley; in "William Blake and his Illustrations to *The Divine Comedy*" Yeats quotes from *Milton*: "Is the Holy Ghost any other than an intellectual fountain?" p.210. In a letter to Joyce (15th Nov 1902) Yeats made an extraordinary and apparently unwitting conflation of Blake and Dr Johnson to describe individual creativity as a fountain (*Letters* 3,p.249).

which Yeats finds in Shakespeare's systematic vision, clearly foreshadow his own. This systematic reading assimilates Shakespeare to a mode of literary history which, in this case at least, tends to dissolve considerations of genre.

In the last section of "At Stratford-on-Avon" Yeats makes a more sustained comparison between Shakespeare's histories and Greek myths, a comparison towards which the mode of the preceding section has been leading. The insistence that the plays "are but one play" and have "something extravagant and superhuman, almost mythological" tells us as much about Yeats's ideas of mythology as it does about Shakespeare. Throughout *Ideas of Good and Evil* Yeats looks for synthesis in national tradition, and here he notes the lost potential for it in England:

Had there been no Renaissance and no Italian influence to bring in the stories of other lands English history would, it may be, have become as important to the English imagination as the Greek myths to the Greek imagination; and many plays by many poets would have woven it into a single story whose contours, vast as those of Greek myth, would have made living men and women seem like swallows building their nests under the architrave of some Temple of the Giants. (p.165; p.109)

For Yeats, national myth has the capacity to provide structures for the living and dying generations. He then returns to a concern with the relation of the imagination to society and to social change, and seeks to find a correlation in terms of simplicity and of rhythm. As more recent English history has been marked by artistic failure and failure of appreciation, so an original dispersal is posited, which has destroyed a mutuality of society and of imagination. Shakespeare is exonerated of utilitarianism, but his very variety is a form of dispersal and disorder:

English literature, because it would have grown out of itself, might have had the simplicity and unity of Greek literature, for I can never get out of my head that no man, even though he be Shakespeare, can write perfectly when his web is woven of the threads that have been spun in many lands. And yet, could those foreign tales have come in if the great famine, the sinking down of popular imagination, the dying out of traditional fantasy, the ebbing out of the energy of race, had not made them necessary? The metaphors and language of Euphuism, compounded of the natural history and mythology of the classics, were doubtless a necessity also that something might be poured into the emptiness. Yet how they injured the simplicity and unity of the speech! Shakespeare wrote at a time when solitary great men were gathering to themselves the fire that had once flowed hither and thither among all men, when individualism in work and thought and emotion was breaking up the old rhythms of life, when the common people,

sustained no longer by the myths of Christianity, and of still older faiths, were sinking into the earth. (pp.165-6; pp.109-110)

Again, access to a resource of ancient myth is the guarantee of social cohesion and coherence.

The failure of England to preserve its central cultural and imaginative source is reflected in its treatment of its greatest poet, and this is then contrasted with the alternative which still obtains in Ireland in the present. Having made a connection between drama and experience of the Galway shore at the beginning of the essay, Yeats concludes by juxtaposing Irish reverence for art with London moralism:

The people of Stratford-on-Avon have remembered little about him, and invented no legend to his glory. They have remembered a drinking-bout of his, and invented some bad verses for him, and that is about all. Had he been some hard-drinking, hard-living, hard-riding Squire they would have enlarged his fame by a legend of his dealings with the devil; but in his day the glory of a Poet, like that of all other imaginative powers, had ceased, or almost ceased outside a narrow class. The poor Gaelic rhymers leave a nobler memory among his neighbours, who will talk of Angels standing like flames about his death-bed, and of voices speaking out of bramble-bushes that he may have the wisdom of the world. The Puritanism that drove the theatres into Surrey was but a part of an inexplicable movement that was trampling out the minds of all but some few thousands born to cultivated ease. (pp.166-7; p.110)

Shakespeare becomes partly an observer with a tragic perspective, but also partly a victim of lack of unity, strong enough to register crisis, but not wholly able to resist it. In "The Theatre" the Elizabethan age had been one of awakening in which "great numbers" participated, but here it is seen as an end and as a dispersal. The inclusion of many mythologies into a national tradition is a complex issue for Yeats: clearly the tendency to see it as pollution of tradition is not entirely consistent with the readiness of many of the essays in *Ideas of Good and Evil* to draw on the broadest possible range of symbols, but in Shakespeare's case this very freedom to accept is also seen as a function of the failure of a central core of tradition.

The essay is full of versions of Englishness. England, and most particularly London, is caught in obsessively temporal and temporary modes of culture. The product of this lack of stable cultural value is a lack of genuine national and social cohesion, producing a state rather than a nation, and this recalls the distinction between a mob and a people in "The Galway Plains". Within his consideration of

Shakespeare, Yeats simultaneously justifies and expounds his own version of history and its effects by reading it into Shakespeare's history. His determination to treat the history plays as a myth cycle supports the reading which allows him to introduce some explanations for the present state of affairs. One cause is the English enthusiasm for utilitarianism. This has been portrayed by Shakespeare, and the misreadings of English, German and an Anglocentric Irish critic in the nineteenth century have only emphasised what Shakespeare saw and showed. In this way Shakespeare and Yeats are brought together in their capacity to register these developments. The consideration of the history plays as a single myth then allows Yeats to posit a dispersal of English myth, and of language, at the Renaissance. His assessment of Shakespeare's assessment of England's failings becomes a justification for a selective reading of England and English traditions even as it is the product of a selective reading. The most daunting English poet actually justifies Yeats's attempt to establish himself at a selective remove from England, from its culture, and from its history. Significant history is myth, and tragical-historical myth explains the circumstances of the production of culture. Phases prove crucial to this reading, but Yeats does not seek precise dates or definitions in cultural history. He produces conflation across boundaries to set up contrasts, so that, for instance, he and Richard II and Verlaine stand in perpetual opposition to Henry V and Edward Dowden. The failures of English culture are not just set directly against the potential for Irish culture, they form part of an exemplary, perpetual conflict.

This concept of dispersal, which can become a social "dissociation of sensibility", later became Yeats's great resource for the Spenser introduction. It also seems to suggest two possibilities for Yeats: the regeneration of a unity resting on simple speech and memory of old national faiths, or the alternative of an art which preserves beauty and teaches appreciation of beauty among "some few thousands born to cultivated ease". As A.G.Stock observes, the preface to the third edition of *Poems* in January 1901 and the essay "What is Popular Poetry?" show Yeats constructing an analysis of poetry and tradition which comprehends aristocracy and artificial beauty but also holds onto something of Morris's concern with a whole society.⁵⁶ In these essays Yeats seems to have anticipated the

⁵⁶ A.G.Stock, "Yeats on Spenser", in *In Excited Reverie* ed. A.N.Jeffares and K.G.W.Cross (Macmillan; London, 1965), pp.93-101, p.96.

problem that collective cultural nationalism could act against individual creativity, but still wills a more liberating synthesis which would set aristocracy and peasantry in mutual, determined opposition to a middle class utilitarianism distinct from both. However, the divisions and conflicts tend to be more effectively realised than the reconciliations and alliances. Yeats's analysis of English cultural failures, synthesised from combinations of cultural developments, always negotiates between the two implications of potential success and potential failure for Ireland in the present. This dual potential extends to the poet seeking to promote national cultural synthesis.

5. Beyond *Ideas of Good and Evil*

In an account of a conversation with James Joyce, which he had planned to use as the introduction to *Ideas of Good and Evil*, Yeats dramatised himself defending the book against charges of generalisation and excessive emphasis on moribund tradition. The piece begins as a half-humorous attempt to place himself in yet another literary history, this time in terms of contemporary literary generations. Appearing rather fortuitously, Joyce (though unnamed) becomes a questioning literary anti-self and successor. The piece dramatises some of the ambivalences confessed in letters, which I quoted at the start of the last chapter, about the place of the volume within Yeats's career:

I was wondering how long I should be thought a preacher of reckless opinions and a disturber who carries in his hand the irresponsible torch of vain youth. I went out into the street and there a young man came up to me and introduced himself. He told me he had written a book of prose essays or poems, and spoke to me of a common friend. [...]

Why had I concerned myself with politics, with folklore, with the historical setting of events and so on? Above all why had I written about ideas, why had I condescended to make generalizations? These things were all the sign of the cooling of the iron, of the fading out of inspiration.⁵⁷

Those objections, though, are couched in unmistakably Yeatsian prose. Yeats dramatises the generational conflict in his own mode of literary history. In the anecdote, Yeats replies by proving to his interlocutor that these traditions have influenced his, Joyce's, work too. This provides an opportunity for a final synthetic formulation of the central themes of *Ideas of Good and Evil*:

I had told him that I had written these plays quite easily and he said that made it quite certain; his own little book owed nothing to anything but his own mind which was much nearer to God than folklore.

I took up the book and pointing to a thought said, 'You got that from somebody else who got it from the folk'. I felt exasperated and puzzled and walked up and down explaining the dependence of all good art on popular tradition. I said, 'The artist, when he has lived for along time in his own mind with the example of other artists as deliberate as himself, gets into a world of ideas pure and simple. He becomes very highly individualized and at last by sheer pursuit of perfection becomes sterile. Folk imagination on the other hand creates endless images of which there are no ideas. Its stories ignore the moral law and every other law, they are successions of pictures like those seen by children in the fire. You find a type of these two kinds of invention, the invention of artists and the invention of the folk, in the civilization which comes from the town and in the forms of life that one finds in

⁵⁷ Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1954), pp.85-89.

the country. In the towns, especially in big towns like London, you don't find what old writers used to call the people; you find instead a few highly cultivated, highly perfected individual lives, and great multitudes who imitate them and cheapen them. You find, too, great capacity for doing all kinds of things, but an impulse towards creation which grows gradually weaker and weaker. In the country, on the other hand, I mean in Ireland and in places where the towns have not been able to call the tune, you find people who are hardly individualized to any great extent. They live through the same round of duty and they think about life and death as their fathers have told them, but in speech, in the telling of tales, in all that has to do with the play of imagery, they have an endless abundance. [...] The whole ugliness of the modern world has come from the spread of the towns and their ways of thought, and to bring back beauty we must marry the spirit and nature again. When the idea which comes from individual life marries the image that is born from the people, one gets great art, the art of Homer, and of Shakespeare, and of Chartres Cathedral.'

I looked at my young man. I thought, 'I have conquered him now', but I was quite wrong. He merely said, 'Generalizations aren't made by poets; they are made by men of letters. They are no use.'

The concern, evident in Yeats's comments to Quinn, with creating forms rather than with vague desire is perhaps apparent in this attempt to contain and to dramatise accusations of generalisation. The dialogue touches upon some central problems of the book and confronts them in a greater realisation of conflict than the other uses of personal anecdote within these essays. Its failure to solve them may explain why the introduction was not used. Yeats is attempting to determine what will be labelled as abstraction and rejected as such, but finds himself doing so through theories which cannot entirely escape the same accusation. Like arguing against argument and opinion, the pseudo-historical overview and the method of imaginative association have obvious limitations. They can justify themselves only as idiosyncratically creative because they deride all other modes of judgment.

The synthesis of recurrent elements which constitutes this self-quotation also touches on their other principal instability, the question of community. This formulation is more cautious than some others in its valuation of the primitive society in the stabilised chronotope, in which there is no individualisation. Such a society would seem to rule out the development of great perceptive individuals, and so might even be comparable to other and more repellent modes of homogenisation. In this version, this aspect is only half of a spiritual marriage with creative individuality. Again, the complex which is assembled here relies on the fusion of timeless and contemporary, as of individual with community. Through

much of *Ideas of Good and Evil* Yeats describes the intermediaries who make both of these fusions possible as a priesthood, or a group of initiates. This sense of religious mission allows a productively ambiguous portrayal of the relations between the initiates, whether poets or sensitive readers, and a wider society: as a priesthood they may have a social centrality unavailable to other versions of the symbolist poet; as initiates of a secret cult they may be isolated and opposed to mundane and common conventions. However, this privileged group may not be sufficiently distinct in kind from the coteries, the “few highly cultivated” described here, or the “few thousands born to cultivated ease” (“At Stratford-on-Avon” pp.167; p.110) who alone represent the valuable culture of England. The distinction, and the perpetually potential cultural regeneration of Ireland, depends on the few, whether aristocrats in position or in their exceptional artistic perception, becoming prophets and pseudo-religious teachers and on the majority accepting their teachings. Like the predictions of coming ages, if taken literally this too is “too full of aspirations after remote things, too full of desires” and the instability of the ideal anticipates a need to create an aristocracy and an audience rather than just to desire them.⁵⁸ The essay which might be expected to confront the problem of the limitation of audience most directly, “What is Popular Poetry?” finally evades it by placing its hopes in a *de facto* linguistic minority, speakers of Irish, who may achieve the union of the values of a sophisticated coterie with the imaginative energy of a people, and who outnumber the minority, a minority in terms of education and discernment, to be found in the English-speaking world. The obverse of optimism is the realisation that without a new age of imaginative activity, such a limited audience is the best that can be hoped for.

The potential for elitism was recognised and castigated by John Eglinton (William Kirkpatrick Magee), reviewing for the *United Irishman*, which Yeats had considered to be the “one friendly paper” in Dublin.⁵⁹ Rejecting Yeats’s primitivism, Eglinton also challenged the matter of his spiritual histories, asserting that “magical and visionary poetics” come uppermost in the “culminating stages of civilization.” Turning Yeats’s more esoteric ideas against him, he commented

in the tone adopted by Mr Yeats towards the “middle class”, which is simply the mass of mankind, we can gain some idea of how dangerous it would be for mankind that any section of it should achieve

⁵⁸ Letter to Quinn, *Letters* III, p.372.

⁵⁹ *Letters* III, p.342, & n.

transcendental power or knowledge, and how wise are those Powers who so obstinately withhold their secrets from men until they have graduated in faith, hope and charity.⁶⁰

The middle class is for Eglinton a portion of despotic fact which Yeats would will away. In this analysis he identifies the inconsistency of Yeats's socio-imaginative predictions, whose general new imaginative dispensation requires a conversion which could also be a disappearance. Yeats only wished to be reviewed by one Dublin paper, and this may also suggest that for all of the abuse he directs at London and England in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, and for all the considerations of a potential for literature and criticism in Ireland, he had reservations about re-entering public critical controversy in Ireland. Yeats vacillated between real communities, as well as between expectations about future and ideal ones. As Foster shows, English journalistic reviews of the volume criticised the inaccuracy of Yeats's quotations, and Irish ones were generally hostile.⁶¹ *Ideas of Good and Evil* incorporates such hostility to journalism that such responses could perhaps be expected, and the volume was also attacked for its heterodox range of subject matter.

The essays in *Ideas of Good and Evil* do not accumulate to present a set of stable conditions, but they do attain a mode of consistency, although this is a consistency woven together from the alternations between surprisingly linked subjects. These evasive but dominant shifts operate a structural rejection of a series of criteria, as they proceed from versions of history to present-tense rhetoric which evokes community, which expands to comprehend ideas of nationhood founded on memory, revealed and galvanised by symbolism, arising in poetry from rhythm which measures but suspends time, to rewrite history in terms of eternal pattern disclosed by generative poetic meditation rather than narrative. As it orchestrates approaches to this bewildering range of subjects, this style adopts concentrations of symbolism in the connection of the present with personal memory. However it also performs broader circular links which it attributes to communal memory and imagination. These communal possessions are created as they are reached by the poet-critic and his readers in an evoked mode of imaginative relations which

⁶⁰ John Eglinton (William Kirkpatrick Magee) *Anglo-Irish Essays* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1917), "The Philosophy of the Celtic Movement" (1903), pp.41-6, pp.45-6.

⁶¹ Foster, pp.293-4. Foster notes that the *Leader* specifically attacked the volume as English and as appropriate for an English audience, thus refusing to accept the terms and the national associations which Yeats promoted within it.

allows all readers to be potential poetic successors because the conditions of poetic succession are only a part of a wider set of imaginative relations. The book also has its own version of communal possessions, in the images and quotations which recur and draw it together, and it repeatedly juxtaposes quotations from sources historically distant from each other to assert its independence in selecting these possessions. This autonomy declares its own authority, but in doing so it also undermines Yeats's evocations of ultimate order, whether religious or symbolic. The powerful readings which can select a tradition by employing idiosyncratic and revisionist modes of literary history actually threaten the possibility of a truly shared notion of tradition. This instability, and the inconsistency of the histories which contribute to some kinds of order, turn the reader's attention back onto the achievements of synthesis which are the real symbolical successes of the book.

The links through four or five themes rarely occur within a single sentence or even a paragraph, they operate through longer periods within essays which constitute sequential extensions and then establish outrageous inclusions. Literary inheritance might be considered to be properly concerned with looking backward and forward, but these essays complicate linear successions through circular connective operations, and develop a symbolic mode of arranging period, sequence, diversion and synthesis. More than that, they attribute to great literary works a capacity to describe and to escape modes of time. These generally later essays emphasise the uses of restraint and of monotony in poetry, and particularly in symbolist poetry, in contrast to the unrestrained pursuit of eternity, but these emphases are affirmed in sentences whose rhythms gain intensity from the repetition and accumulation of diverse matter. In doing so they elucidate a symbolism established on an unrestrained authority to concentrate any perspective on, or part or version of, history or time into its extrovert complexes. Revelation becomes a symbol of symbolic art as opposed to realism, and is generated by techniques which control the potentially destructive relationships with time and with audience. In the prose which discusses this control, a plethora of versions of time and of audience are imagined in order to explore the workings of symbolism, so that *Ideas of Good and Evil* is necessarily less consistent in its notions of history and of audience than in its versions of the symbolism which these notions serve.

These histories and contingent imaginings of community clearly anticipate the phases and the elected audiences and peoples of much of Yeats's later poetry.

Within these essays we might also see the realisation of a technique of manipulating sequences, with its potential for accumulating and containing tangential approaches into complexes which defy final description in terms either of finished stasis or of developing movement, or perhaps which allow either mode of description to be employed with equal accuracy and inadequacy. Charles O'Neill notes of these essays that,

Their contribution to the later poetry of Yeats has been, I believe, overlooked. In managing the syntactical complexities of his talismanic sentences and in the sudden "leaps" of poetic and intuitive "logic" the essays make, Yeats went a long way toward the intricate stanzas and sharp contrasts of his finest poetry.⁶²

The list of these characteristics could be expanded and elaborated to include the shocking subject shifts and sectional juxtapositions; shifts from limited individual to grand extra-temporal perspective; forms of time as criteria for modes of judgment; rhetorical questions; conflicting historical gyres; perception of any point in national, communal or personal history, and any moment of artistic creation, as being on a curve of growth or decline; unquestioning authoritative application of models of change or development which are far from conventional or clear; touchstones of visual art and similar uses of exemplary artists. Perhaps most crucially, these elements are orchestrated by and continually feed a synthetic, syncretic imagination which absorbs its subjects perpetually into its style and into new formulations, and which recurrently insists on the rhythmic performance of its symbolic rhythmic principles. While retaining the appeal to "eternity" as an ultimate standard, Yeats learned in the course of these essays to renegotiate versions of time as perpetually creative resources. Yeats makes a virtue of the synthetic power of his own thought and language in *Ideas of Good and Evil* and through the implications and the associations created by its interconnectedness, it achieves a system of critical practice and is perhaps the most systematic and internally coherent book of his career up to that date.

⁶² O'Neill, p.134.

Chapter 3

Yeats and Spenser 1

1. Yeats's early encounters with Spenser

The remainder of my thesis concerns Yeats's work as successor to, and adaptor, editor and critic of, Edmund Spenser. The main focus of my attention is the volume *Poems of Spenser*, which Yeats edited within the same period in which he completed *Ideas of Good and Evil*. and I will show how the same modes of literary history which he employed in the volume of essays characterised his treatment of this major poetic predecessor. I will also examine Yeats's readings and adaptations of Spenser through the rest of his career, in particular the career after that selected edition, in order to demonstrate the relations of his critical and editorial approaches to his poetic practice.

From the opening of "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" ("The woods of Arcady are dead,"), to the riderless high horse of "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" and beyond, Yeats refashioned symbols of poetry and symbolic regions of poetry into daunting expressions of loss and fracture. He clearly found anxieties and opportunities in placing himself at the latest point in a range of traditions perpetually about to end. These traditions are also frequently synthesised, known and located in the moment before their ending. This presentation of the problematic nature of poetic traditions and of their failure pervades many of his more detailed literary histories, but it is evident in Yeats's encounters with Spenser throughout his career that he associated this predecessor in particular with change of phase, and of lost access to mythopoeic capacities. Yeats's adaptations often imply an attention to perceptions of predecessors' notions of tradition, but in the case of Spenser these instances suggest failure, and tradition in crisis, even more than many other cases do, because Yeats saw Spenser both as a source for images of crisis, and as a very acute example of poetic potential which ended in failure. Without suggesting that Yeats's uses of Spenser can be reduced to an entirely consistent scheme, it can be shown that they demonstrate these certain associations again and again.

None of the reformations within Yeats's church of poetic tradition involved the simple replacement of one significant model by another. Different

combinations are evident in different phases: concentrating on Yeats's early career we may note some major influences including Spenser, Shelley, Blake, Morris and Rossetti. But Shelley led Yeats to neoplatonism, Spenser arguably to other Renaissance poets, and Blake contributed to modes of reading many other poets. Yeats's more recent nineteenth-century poetic predecessors, notably Browning, gave possible terms for reading earlier ones. Analysis is frustrated by the proliferation of related interests. *The Island of Statues* does not simply display the influences of Shelley and of Spenser, but of Shelley's imitation of Spenser. Furthermore, in the interview "I Became an Author" Yeats also included Keats and Jonson among the models for that Arcadian play, and the manuscripts display more Keatsian passages than the published work: Spenser was also reaching Yeats through Keats.¹ When Yeats had progressed from his early uses of Spenserian settings, Spenser remained a presence behind his reading of Shelleyan Intellectual Beauty. David Gardiner has examined the presence of Yeats's conflicts with Edward Dowden in the Spenser introduction, and demonstrates that while reacting against Dowden's summary of Spenser, Yeats also adapted elements of it.² Tracing Yeats's influences is never simple and rarely definitive. Bornstein's essay "The Making of Yeats's Spenser" is itself in part a reassessment of the view of Spenser's influence offered in Bornstein's earlier work on Yeats and Shelley.³ Wayne Chapman makes interesting use of what he calls dyadic relations in analysis of Yeats's multiple interests, but binary combinations and oppositions tend to be only partially explicatory of Yeats's sometimes unlikely elaborations of traditions.⁴ The draft of an early unpublished quest-poem with a hero named Sir Roland may suggest that Browning is another possible model of Romantic adaptation of Spenserian quests.

The modifications and complications of Yeats's ideas about Spenser are evident in several phases, and in several kinds of phases, in his prose writings.

¹ "I Became an Author", *Uncollected Prose II*, pp.506-9, p.508. *The Early Poetry Volume 1: Mosada and The Island of Statues: Manuscript Materials*, ed. by George Bornstein, (Ithaca and London: Cornell U P, 1987), introduction p.10, pp.280-286; *The Early Poetry Vol II: "The Wanderings of Oisín" and other early poems to 1895: Manuscript Materials*, ed. by George Bornstein, (Ithaca and London: Cornell U P, 1994).

² Gardiner, "To Go There as a Poet Merely: Spenser, Dowden and Yeats", *New Hibernia Review* 1:2 (Summer 1997), pp.112-133.

³ Bornstein, *Yeats and Shelley* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

Aside from the introduction for the *Poems of Spenser*, Spenser recurs elsewhere as an occasional example and contrast to other poets, though later references tend sometimes to simplify him into an embodiment of one of the issues in that introduction (for instance “I disliked his historical pictures - had not allegory spoiled Edmund Spenser?”).⁵ In Spenser’s case, neoplatonism offers another tradition in which Yeats could locate his forebear, a tradition which greatly appealed to him and which informed much of his own work in single symbols and in the broader systematic propositions, but also a tradition offering negotiations and reinterpretations of history which tend to undermine or complicate any other versions of tradition. Yeats’s own autobiographical writings describe the importance of different influences at different stages, and of course the precise accounts presented in the autobiographies themselves vary from one period, of the career to another, and from one mode to another. His tendency to introduce idiosyncratic autobiographical anecdote into critical writing also disturbs any attempt to render an account of his critical position or of any stable conception on his part of literary history. In Yeats’s prose and poetry, various portions of the past become present in ways inimical to clear critical discourse. Approaches to Spenser’s influence on Yeats, then, require examination of a range of materials, including manuscripts, published poems, revisions, drama, autobiography, critical essays, historical analyses. Each has its own complexities. I will consider some characteristics of the early uses of Spenser, and then proceed to Yeats’s more complex versions of literary history and the adaptations which succeed those versions.

Yeats’s early verse plays experiment with several problematic contrasts, and stage the pursuit of hazardous desires, in partially Spenserian modes, but Yeats’s early interest in problematic and unsuccessful quests may also suggest, among other anxieties, his doubts over which model to follow. In Yeats’s versions of literary history he allegorises the history of allegory and offers symbolist definitions of symbolism: his critical writing repeatedly absorbs the literary modes

⁴ Wayne Chapman, *Yeats and English Renaissance Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1991) pp.68-101, particularly pp.68-78.

⁵ *Essays and Introductions*, Introduction, p.vii.

which it describes, as his poetry and plays enact the choices which he made in directing his literary career.

Spenser's influence on Yeats's very early poetry is considerable. In *The Island of Statues*, in *The Wanderings of Oisín*, and even more obviously in some of the early manuscripts, Spenser provides a model for the imaginative landscapes, including woods, quests, and boats to enchanted isles. Yeats also experimented with Spenserian stanza forms. Richard Davidson, Wayne Chapman and George Bornstein have considered Spenser's influence on Yeats in these published poems and in the drafts, and I will make some brief observations about the kind of uses which Yeats made of Spenser in his earliest poetry. Bornstein, Chapman and Davidson identify the unpublished poem "Sir Roland" as Yeats's most clearly Spenserian early effort.⁶ As Bornstein observes

In it Yeats's early Spenserianism runs wild. Roland himself wears a red cross like the hero of *The Faerie Queene* and, again like the Red Cross Knight, must struggle against figures called Sansloy, Sansfoy and Sansjoy, about whom Yeats also composed a related lyric.⁷

Bornstein notes that the poem has "an embedded narrative structure": the poet describes Sir Roland who relates Olaf's relation of a story culminating in yet another self-describing voice. Chapman observes that this succession of narratives differs in kind from Spenser's: "the Redcrosse Knight's adversaries become Romantic fallen heroes in Yeats's poem."⁸ The drafts of the "related lyric" concerning Sansfoy, Sansloy and Sansjoy show attempts in two different stanza forms. These drafts seem already to indicate both the nature of Yeats's early borrowings from Spenser, and his mode of adaptation. Spenserian figures and settings offered Yeats a conventional but also folkloric poetic region, in which he could generate evocations of moods. These evocations, though, tend to take the form of self-descriptive lyrics. They evade narrative and do not offer sustained allegorical or didactic passages. The poetry keeps escaping from the original scene which generates it. Bornstein also shows that another early manuscript, "A Soul of the fountain", "invoked Spenser's great poem directly":

Out of an ancient book Id heard
"Be bold" the sage of old hath said

⁶ Chapman p.72, Bornstein ed. *Early Poetry II* p.19; Davidson pp.52-3. Chapman dates the poem to the period 1882-3.

⁷ *Early Poetry II*, p.19.

⁸ Chapman, p.73.

Be Bold Be Bold and Bold be ever more
And yet be not to bold thus have I read
Out of some famous book of ancient lore⁹

Even this ancient record of the ancient sage is enclosed within the speech of the soul of the fountain, and this very enclosure seems to prevent the poem from expanding on its chosen original text. This poem anticipates and contrasts with Yeats's much later and more assured talismanic adaptations of particular phrases from Spenser.

In much of Yeats's early poetry characters emerge from Spenserian scenes to deliver further lyrical episodes. In the manuscript of "The Old Grey Man" the narrator relates the old man's appearance in a wood and repeats his song about a beautiful maiden who may also be an enchantress.¹⁰ Even in *Mosada* a monk sings before the main action gets under way.¹¹ This kind of shift in mode or stanza form is of course also partly Spenserian: in particular the shepherds' songs in *The Island of Statues* are clearly inspired by Spenser's eclogues.¹² The evident movement from quest-narrative to dramatic poems in this period suggests that Yeats was aware that his writing was escaping containment within a narrative mode. However, these adaptations seem uncontrolled, and marked by a lack of concern with genre. *The Seeker* involves a meeting between shepherds and another Spenserian knight, but the shepherds themselves seem disturbed by the generic distinction between them and the tragic quester.¹³ *The Island of Statues* pursues this synthesis of Spenserian modes and types even further, but also fails to make very much of the resulting mixture. The poetic regions continue to inspire more than they can combine, and deliver elegiac moods which evade precise dramatic purpose. As Melchiori noted, "The Song of the Happy Shepherd", published in *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* as "Song of the Last Arcadian", was first published as the epilogue to *The Island of Statues* and *The Seeker*.¹⁴ The contrasts of mode in these works do seem to be related to a purposeful adaptation of Spenserian elements into depictions of conflicts between life and art, love and

⁹ *Early Poetry II*, pp19, 417. *The Faerie Queene* ed. by A C Hamilton (London and New York: Longman 1977, corrected 1980) Book III. Canto 11. Stanza 54.

¹⁰ *Early Poetry II*, p.429.

¹¹ *VPoems* p.696.

¹² *ibid.*, pp.645-8.

¹³ *ibid.*, pp.682-3.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp.63-7; first published in the *Dublin University Review* I (9th Oct 1885), 230-1.

death, or seductive female power and male heroic values. However, the modes which form in these adaptations rarely achieve dramatic clarity, and seem to resist allegorical exegesis as well. Yeats's questers are more consistently desperate, more hopelessly misled, in comparison with those who undergo Spenser's moral tests. These works accordingly show a conflict between allegorical structures and a reluctance to clarify interpretation at the cost of evocation, and also a conflict between familiarity and mystery. The moral scheme is removed, but not replaced, and in all although Spenser was clearly valuable as a source of scenes and figures, satisfactory rearrangement proved difficult. As I will show below, in his Spenser introduction Yeats accused Spenser of failing to link his pastoral scenes and enchanted woods with the real poetic resources of Ireland. He may well have been blaming the Elizabethan poet for his own early failure to make anything more substantial from his evident intoxication with Spenser's poetry as a source of evocative regions. In Yeats's career after his Spenser introduction, his adaptations of Spenserian images and phrases are generally more purposeful and more minutely ordered, although still synthetic in that they can draw from more than one passage of Spenser.

Yeats's own later descriptions of his early Spenserian efforts are reductive. In "Reveries over Childhood and Youth" he mentions them after describing his self-conscious awkwardness ("I exaggerated my blunders and was miserable"), and the faults of the verse come to coincide with this idiosyncratic and embarrassed isolation:

I had begun to write poetry in imitation of Shelley and of Edmund Spenser, play after play - for my father exalted dramatic poetry above all other kinds - and I invented fantastic and incoherent plots. My lines but seldom scanned, for I could not understand the prosody in the books, although there were many lines that taken by themselves had music. I spoke them slowly as I wrote and only discovered when I read them to somebody else that there was no common music, no prosody.¹⁵

Yeats's first reference to Spenser in his criticism is an allusion with which he concludes "The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson", first published in the *Irish Fireside*, October 9th 1886.¹⁶ The article is less sophisticated and more simply enthusiastic than much of Yeats's writing on the revival of ballads and of ancient

¹⁵ *Autobiographies*, pp.66-7.

¹⁶ *Uncollected Prose* I, pp.81-87.

myths in modern poetry, but it advances some Celticist positions which anticipate *Ideas of Good and Evil*. It also anticipates some of the problems of that book: Yeats begins the article with a celebration of Irish legends as among the worlds great cycles of myth, but soon celebrates Ferguson's early work as "lyrical and romantic". Yeats is reluctant to draw any very clear distinction here between lyric and heroic epic. He does allow some differences between Ferguson's early lyricism and his later versions of myths, but in effect locates the sources of both "heroic passion" and "idyllic thought" in a cultural origin far from "our complex life". In effect, the original imaginative resource which Yeats relates to folklore and to myth seems to be placed in a condition prior to separation into genres, as he considers the original societies in which those myths flourished to have manifested a kind of imaginative unity which has been altered by later divisions. This resource is defined as undifferentiated. In very direct terms, Yeats describes Ferguson's translation of a poem which is "one of 'the things of the old time before'" as amoral, not didactic or utilitarian, specifically not "as a great English writer has said, 'a criticism of life,' but rather a fire in the spirit." Arnold's influence is detectable, though, in Yeats's claim that "the Celtic nature is mainly lyrical". The rest of the article is principally a vindication of Ferguson and of the spirit of the Celt ("indomitable pagans", "The lyric nature loves to linger on what is strange and fantastic") against the failure of English criticism to recognise their qualities ("Can anything good come out of Galilee,' they thought"): imperial authority is challenged by reinvigorating imaginative spirituality. It concludes:

One thing more before I cease; if I were asked to characterize, as shortly as may be, these poems, I should do so by applying to them the words of Spenser, "barbarous truth."¹⁷

The allusion is to the episode in Book I canto VI in which Una is saved from Sansloy by a troop of fauns and satyrs, who subsequently worship her, but in particular it draws on a moment of doubt:

The doubtfull Damzell dare not yet commit
Her single person to their barbarous truth,
But still twixt feare and hope amazd does sit,
Late learnd what harme to hastie trust ensu'th. (I.vi.12: 1-3)

¹⁷ UP I, p.87. Frayne reproduces the *Irish Fireside's* misspelling "Spencer", and suggests Herbert Spencer, but corrects it in the errata in the second volume.

Yeats's appeal for the acceptance of Ferguson and, through Ferguson, of ancient Irish poetry and myth and of treatments of myth identifies the ancient Irish with Spenser's uncultivated but naturally righteous figures: in effect, he makes no attempt to deny a lack of literary sophistication, but turns it into a virtue, an original quality of "faithfulness to things tragic and bitter, to thoughts that wear one's life out and scatter one's joy."¹⁸ He takes on some of Spenser's complexity in the use of the word "truth": as well as veracity, it implies an unbroken connection to original artistic and passionate values. In his introduction to Spenser's poems, Yeats would make more of what he saw as Spenser's own reluctance to accept that such "truth" was available in Ireland.

Two other references to Spenser in Yeats's criticism before his selection from Spenser are both in reviews of books on folklore and both locate him among multinational, transhistorical examples of manifestations of the great memory. In the later example, from June 1894, which I quoted in my introduction, Spenser's example is among those which show to writers of the present the potential for literature which employs ancient tales, that they may "weave immortal woofs again." In the earlier piece, Spenser is placed in an even more encyclopedic array of closet folklorists:

Folklore is at once the Bible, the Thirty-nine articles, and the Book of Common Prayer, and well-nigh all the great poets have lived by its light. Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare and even Dante, Goethe, and Keats, were little more than folk-lorists with musical tongues. The root-stories of the Greek poets are told to-day at the cabin fires of Donegal; the Slavonian peasants tell their children now, as they did a thousand years before Shakespeare was born, of the spirit prisoned in the cloven pine; the Swedes had need neither of Dante nor Spenser to tell them of the living trees that cry or bleed if you break off a bough; and through all the long backward and abysm of time, Faust, under many names, has signed the infernal compact, and girls at St. Agnes' Eve have waited for visions of their lovers to come to them "upon the honeyed middle of the night." It is only in these latter decades that we have refused to learn of the poor and the simple, and turned atheists in our pride. The folk-lore of Greece and Rome lasted us a long time; but having ceased to be a living tradition, it became both worn out and unmanageable, like an old servant.¹⁹

The overwhelming prose tends to disguise ambiguities: folklore may be always available for use in sophisticated literary works, but its usefulness may also die out.

¹⁸ *UP I*, p.87.

Yeats also fails to note that the detection of international types and motifs in folklore, and the interest in folklore as both ancient and continuing, were actually more evident in “these latter decades” than previously, and both had their different implications for the usefulness of folklore to cultural nationalism.

Spenser is linked to here to living folklore, but also potentially cut off from it: it has continued without requiring his literary uses of it. Yeats’s co-opting of religious language is overt here, supporting his co-opting of major religious texts. The inclusive, associative technique is not merely vague, though: it implies a rejection of other, less inclusive, versions of tradition, and significantly disregards distinctions of literary form and mode. Whole oeuvres can be read as epic encyclopedias of folkloric motifs. The possible fissure between literature and folklore is one of the issues which lies behind the profusion of cultural contrasts and dissociations in the Spenser introduction.

¹⁹ *UP I*, pp.283-8, p.284. The article was published in the *Speaker*, August 19th 1893, and is an enlarged review of T. F. Thistleton Dyer’s *The Ghost World* (London, 1893).

2. *Poems of Spenser*

Concepts of dispersal in culture and in communal imagination in Yeats's work always have potential implications for the Ireland of the present time of writing. These implications are more overt in *Ideas of Good and Evil* than in the Spenser introduction, but Spenser offers some particular opportunities for Yeats's nationalisation of aesthetics. Yeats's idiosyncratic historical analyses play out several series of possibilities: ways of seeing histories, and possible ways for culture and imaginative production within cultures to proceed. Yeats's use of these analyses is by no means consistent, but as I noted earlier, in general these several series are adaptations of two potential futures for literary and cultural history: the regeneration of an original imaginative unity or its restriction to "some few thousands born to cultivated ease".¹ The extent to which the few may educate - or convert - the many remains in doubt. Ideal syntheses - still recalling Spenser - recur through Yeats's later work, for instance in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited". However, in that case the synthesis is cast into elegiac terms, in another version of a lost state of unity.

Yeats's achievement of a stance which authorised his selection from Spenser and his reorientations of versions of tradition actually relies on the insistent introduction of instabilities into cultural traditions, instabilities which necessarily make some of his literary histories inconsistent and even question what kind of history he is pursuing, and what kind of relations he theorises between artistic productions and social and political contexts. His attempts to set aristocracy and peasantry in mutual, determined opposition to a middle class utilitarianism distinct from both tend to realise divisions and conflicts more effectively than reconciliations and alliances. This stress on division allows Yeats to work through a range of issues in his confrontation with Spenser, and this use of modes of division is even more pronounced in the Spenser introduction than in Yeats's other prose of the period. Although I suggest that this liberating approach to traditions and to the primacy of a "poetic" mode of history - one which measures events and all cultural developments in terms of imaginative conditions - informed much of Yeats's selective technique to other writers through the rest of his career, it seems in his later borrowings from Spenser that he continued to associate the Elizabethan

poet in particular with the kind of cultural shift with which he experimented in this introduction. In his later poetry, Yeats adapted Spenser to create images of qualities threatened or lost, and for depictions of changes in imaginative history.

Some of Yeats's models for writing the historiography of the Renaissance are well documented. Thomas McAlindon notes the influence of Morris on Yeats's ambivalence about the Renaissance.² David Gardiner has contrasted Yeats's introduction with Dowden's work on Spenser, and identified the adaptation as well as the antagonism in Yeats's relation to his one-time mentor. Wayne Chapman traces three other major models here: Arnold, Pater and J. B. Yeats, and adds that Yeats learned enough of the possibilities of writing strains of idiosyncratic, combative social and cultural history to turn them against Arnold and to place him "at the end of a line of descent which began with Milton", a descent towards formality and emptiness.³ The adaptation of Arnold's arguments which Yeats achieved in "The Celtic Element in Literature" could also be modified further to discuss modes of Renaissance. Potential revivals of imaginative conditions, their persistence in Ireland and their cessation in England, disrupt English and Anglocentric notions of poetic tradition. While I note the importance of Pater and Arnold as models for Yeats's versions of the Renaissance, it is this process of division, re-complication and association which I will pursue through the Spenser introduction, noting its liberating potential for Yeats's selections from and constructions of traditions, stressing the functions of inconsistency in this potential, and noting Yeats's growing facility in applying versions of time to both editorial and creative effects. Yeats detects various births and rebirths, but more failures, so that his account of Elizabethan England is concerned more with last flowerings than with beginnings. Furthermore, across these potentially cyclical accounts Yeats also suggests perpetual oppositions. These are sometimes accorded the status of mythic archetypes, and as well as considering literary history in terms of links to an original state, links characterised by an affinity for folklore, Yeats's versions of literary history also rely on inclusion of aspects of folklore and of myth, so some other unlikely influences also inform his readings. I suggest that the influence of

¹ "At Stratford-on-Avon", *IGE*, p.167.

² Thomas McAlindon, "Yeats and the English Renaissance", *PMLA* LXXXII:2 (May 1967), pp.157-161.

³ Chapman, pp.31-67, p.35.

Standish James O'Grady, one of Yeats's major early literary heroes and a writer both on ancient Irish myth and on the Irish Elizabethan age, may also be found in the Spenser introduction. I stress O'Grady's influence because he was perhaps the most important model for Yeats's combinations of mythography and history, combinations which rely on the notion that Ireland past and present, unlike England, could draw on original and communal imaginative possessions.

J. B. Bullen examines the invention and development of some historiographical concepts, and demonstrates that characterisations of the Renaissance as a period continued to be formed with implications for the advantages or disadvantages of the conditions of the present, particularly in terms of the effects on art and religion of changes of the relation of individuality and community, whether local, national or international.⁴ Versions of the Renaissance, and of Renaissance, and the implications of those versions, are of course legion. The notion, however subtle, of a divide which separates the Renaissance from the Middle Ages also continues to provoke debate in historical and literary studies to this day. Yeats's first use of the term in the Spenser introduction relates it particularly to art, where it becomes an attention to technique: "the last struggle of the passion of the Middle Ages with the craft of the Renaissance." (p.xxi). However, his adaptations are diverse. Yeats's partial and inconsistent versions of the Renaissance are not isolated anomalies. His radical move in historiography, a historiography primarily concerned with poetry, is to see art and changes in modes of art not only as in some respects symptomatic of conditions of life, but as the most significant mode of history, the only mode which can escape temporal restrictions. What he chooses to see as temporal restrictions, though, are also characterised by some further assumptions about poetry. Using selected artistic productions in combination with assertions on the variable relations of art to life, with versions of historical phase, and with appeals to eternity and to an original condition of imaginative production and reception, Yeats presents an interplay of movements rather than a summary of the period and of Spenser. Behind any brief encapsulation of a movement which may seem to approach definition and limitation, lies the potential of an available transhistorical bank of symbols which may disrupt historical definition. While analysing the introduction in detail I will

identify the divisions and oppositions which make this interplay advantageous both for Yeats's implications about the necessary aesthetic positions for poetic creation in his present, and for his selection and adaptation from the poetry of the past.

Some of Bullen's approaches, particularly to Pater, prove very useful in an examination of Yeats's literary historiography. As Bullen shows, Pater attempted to resist any clear distinction between Medieval and Renaissance, and to an even greater degree also came to present Classical and Romantic as perpetual principles rather than as easily dated literary-historical periods. Pater's subtlety and his intensity rely on abandonment of simple relations between terms and chronology. This is also true of Arnold's treatment of the conflict between Hebraism and Hellenism. However, for Pater the Renaissance came to signify "the act of rediscovery itself - an act which brings us back into contact with a world which we have lost."⁵ For Yeats, the possibility of rediscovery, though of a different rediscovery from Pater's, is crucial, but it is carefully modified both in the past and in the present. Bullen also distinguishes between versions of the Renaissance which are, like Ruskin's, "unpeopled", and those which are dominated by individual figures.⁶ This is a rewarding approach to Yeats's versions of history, particularly in considering the gradual evolution of his interactions between history and personality. In the Spenser introduction great individual personalities tend to be elegised, other individuals, notably Cromwell, come to represent almost inhuman forces. In Yeats's presentation, Spenser himself notably fails either to stand out from historical movements or to drive them. As Bullen shows, Pater altered his position on the religious issues of the Renaissance, but one broad formulation is significant to Yeats: Pater's association of Medieval Catholicism with despair of life, and of the Renaissance, moving against it, as desire for and sympathy with the world.⁷ Yeats's versions of the movements relevant and relative to Spenser, and present in Spenser's work, seems at first to reverse this: he sees an original sympathy with life as overcome by official morality in English culture during Spenser's lifetime. This relies on a sense that in Ireland and in part in Medieval England, this sympathy with the world did not need to be rediscovered,

⁴ *The Myth of the Renaissance in Nineteenth Century Writing* (Oxford: OUP, 1994).

⁵ pp.12-15; p.292; p.279.

⁶ Bullen, p.12.

⁷ *ibid.*, p.278.

contact with the source of it in an original state had not been lost. Yeats rearranges the same opposition to blame Puritanism rather than medieval Catholicism, and projects broader movements out from what he considers the limitations of Spenser's poetry. He also complicates his formulations: where Pater underplayed single cultural shifts in favour of broader principles, Yeats multiplies shifts and divisions. Division itself becomes a principle. Where Pater sees potential Renaissances everywhere, Yeats also sees further possible fractures of imaginative community, particularly in Ireland. He takes on some of the internationalist claims of mythography and study of folklore, but reinserts national distinctions into them, to undermine English "ownership" of literary histories. The construction of spiritual and artistic histories of the Renaissance was also influenced by Joachimist impulses, and my reading of Yeats's account of Spenser, like my reading of *Ideas of Good and Evil*, is informed by the analyses of persistent and adapted patterns in historiography presented in *Joachim of Fiore and the Myth of the Eternal Evangel in the Nineteenth Century*.⁸

Because it is an accompaniment to and justification of a selection from a whole poetic oeuvre, the implications of the Spenser introduction are more complex than those of the essays on Shakespeare and Morris, which are probably the closest to it in style, method and subject. The Shakespeare plays under consideration were at least partially determined by the Stratford season, and Morris is treated as though dissociated almost completely from his work, but the Spenser edition allowed the imposition of a restrictive interpretation at source, as it were: no misreading is as simply effected as not reading.

The development towards selection and its bias towards a "lyric" Spenser have their counterpart in the critical debate on Spenser which had continued through the nineteenth century. Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt saw Spenser as the creator of sensual, ideal and unreal beauty. Their sense of a Spenser separated from reality differs in some crucial respects from Yeats's, but anticipates his modes of dividing Spenser and his work. Hazlitt concentrates on poetic luxuriance:

Spenser, as well as Chaucer, was engaged in active life; but the genius of his poetry was not active: it is inspired by the love of ease, and relaxation from all the cares and business of life.

⁸ Marjorie Reeves and Warwick Gould, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

Spenser's moral concerns are also diverted by Hazlitt's assertion that "the love of beauty, and not of truth, is the moving principle of his mind."⁹ Leigh Hunt's *Imagination and Fancy* is a series of selections from poets with critical commentary, and his essay "Spenser" is followed in the volume by "A Gallery of Pictures from Spenser". This editing process tends to isolate Spenser's images and episodes from their structures, and so also from any consistent purpose, thus tending to confirm Hunt's view that

Spenser is the farthest removed from the ordinary cares and haunts of the world of all poets that ever wrote, except perhaps Ovid; and this, which is the reason why mere men of business and the world do not like him.¹⁰

Again, this anticipates some of Yeats's areas of interest, but not the arrangement which he makes of these issues: Yeats remained fascinated by Spenser's creation of poetic regions, and recurrently declared poetry's relation, or lack of relation, to business of various kinds. His major development of the positions of these critical forebears lies in his mode of reintroducing issues into Spenser's life and works in the form of conflicting forces.

Bibliographical history shows that in the later nineteenth century for the first time many selections of Spenser were published, as well as the several major editions: editorial practice and critical assessment both tended to break up the consistency of Spenser's longer works.¹¹ In criticism, allegory was frequently discounted, trivialised rather than criticised in Hazlitt's case, or seen as an obstacle and the broader structures of *The Faerie Queene* were given relatively little attention, as were poems of any complaint, bitterness or satire except on the subject of love. James Russell Lowell follows this approach, rejecting the importance of moral concerns in the poems, though not underestimating Spenser's intention to be moral. After his memorable description of allegory as "imagination adapted for beginners", he concludes with the assessment of Spenser's work as a gallery of pictures, "splendidly superfluous", of "careless abundance". *The Faerie Queene*

⁹ William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London and Toronto: J M Dent, 1930-34), V, "On Chaucer and Spenser" (1818), 19-44, p.34; p.35.

¹⁰ Leigh Hunt, *Imagination and Fancy* (London: Smith Elder, 4th ed. 1871), "Spenser", 62-120, p.65.

¹¹ Frederick Ives Carpenter, *A Reference Guide to the Works of Edmund Spenser* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923), pp.106-123.

describes “the land of pure heart’s ease where no ache or sorrow of spirit can enter”.¹²

Edward Dowden offered an alternative approach: his essay “Spenser, the Poet and Teacher” was in part a refutation of Lowell. Dowden rejected any sense of careless pictorialism in Spenser, and stressed his effective moral “coherence and ardour”. Dowden’s emphasis on unity also denied the validity of any selection. He allowed a possible moral problem with varied evocations of beauty and, like Yeats, objected to some of the more mechanical passages, but never allows morality to be irrelevant:

With respect to beauty, Spenser’s teaching is that true beauty is always sacred, always ennobling to the spirit which is itself sane and pure, but the sensual mind will put even beauty to sensuous uses. And he declares further that there is a forged or feigned beauty, which is no more than a fair illusion covering inward foulness and shame.¹³

Acrasia is a difficult case, but in general Dowden sees Spenser’s moral enthusiasm as

a breath of life, which has an antiseptic power, which kills the germs of disease, and is antagonistic to the relaxed fibre, the lethargy, the dissolution, or disintegrating life-in-death of sensuality.

In his summary, Dowden also described Spenser as attempting “to make the national life of England a great unity - spiritual, yet not disdaining earth or the things of earth. [...] But the contending parties of the English nation went their ways.”¹⁴ Finally Dowden confronted a version of the aesthetic tendency which he had opposed throughout his essay: “It is the heresy of modern art that only useless things should be made beautiful.” Spenser, in contrast, wrought “armour for the soul.”¹⁵

In rejecting the didactic aspects of Spenser as essentially unpoetic and locked in the official morality of his time and political circumstances, Yeats also turned against Dowden’s reading of Spenser. As the brief mention in “At Stratford-on-Avon” also suggests (*IGE*, p.156), Yeats came to associate Dowden with the imposition of inappropriate and English cultural standards, imputing to him the

¹² James Russell Lowell, *Collected Writings*, 5 vols, (Houghton Mifflin, 1890-1901), IV, 265-353, p.345.

¹³ *The Complete Works in Verse and Prose of Edmund Spenser*, ed. by Rev Alexander B Grosart (London: Spenser Society, 1884), 5 vols, I, 304-339, p.327.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.337.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.338.

fault of a corresponding lack of engagement with Irish literature. In fact, this antagonism towards Dowden had been accumulating for years. Dowden had advised the young Yeats on *The Island of Statues*, and Yeats's loss of admiration for him is related in "Reveries Over Childhood and Youth" and is initiated in that version by Dowden's views on Shelley.¹⁶ In Yeats's second piece of published criticism, like the first, on Ferguson's poetry, Yeats deplored Dowden's lack of attention to Irish writing.¹⁷ Over the following years, his public addresses to the Trinity Professor became increasingly strident, although he could be more lenient, and was able on occasion to see Dowden's attitudes to Irish literature as unfortunate products of a misguided and forgivable cosmopolitanism.¹⁸ Philip Marcus, Eve Patten and Terence Brown have considered Dowden's part in disputes which defined attitudes towards cultural nationalism.¹⁹ David Gardiner has examined Dowden's writings on Spenser, usefully noting that Spenser features significantly in the "Elizabethan world picture" offered in Dowden's *Shakespeare, His Mind and Art*.²⁰ Clearly Dowden became a crucial antagonist for Yeats. However, in terms of Yeats's versions of literary history, Dowden and the readings associated with Dowden are subjected to an unhistorical merging. As in "At Stratford-on-Avon", the stance of the Irish Unionist nineteenth-century critic and the growth of English imperialist and utilitarian forces in the Renaissance are effectively elided. The failure imaginatively to engage with Ireland which Yeats imputes to Spenser is seen to be repeated in Anglocentric Spenser criticism. In this elision of the antipathetic aspects of Spenser and Dowden, literary and critical history are overlaid by perpetual and archetypal failures of imaginative response.

¹⁶ *Autobiographies*, pp.85-9.

¹⁷ *UP* 1, pp.87-104, p.89: *Dublin University Review* November 1886. Like the preceding piece, the essay is in part an obituary, but comes to bury Ferguson as an Irish writer in response if not in contradiction, as Frayne notes (p.87n), to those who had emphasised Ferguson's loyalty to the crown.

¹⁸ *UP* 1, pp. 346-9, 351-3, 383-4; in a letter to the *Daily Express* (March 11th, 1899), Yeats suggested that Dowden "would have preferred" to see Trinity College opposing "the often narrow enthusiasm of nationalism with the great intellectual passions of the world", *UP* 2, pp.148-152, p.151.

¹⁹ Philip Marcus, *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Renaissance* 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Syracuse University Press, 1987), pp.104-121; Eve Patten, "A 'general crowd of small singers': Yeats and Dowden Reassessed", *Yeats Annual* 12 (1996), pp.29-44; Terence Brown, *Ireland's Literature* (Mullingar: Lilliput Press, 1988), pp.42-6. Patten shows that in setting Ferguson and Dowden apart, Yeats obscured much that they had in common, pp.33-36.

²⁰ Gardiner, p.114.

Yeats's own version of Spenser is closely related to the early Romantic essayists, but he uses some of the divisions which they see in Spenser to wholly new purposes. Bornstein notes that the marginalia in Yeats's own copy of Spenser's complete works, the edition from which he made his selection, show where Spenser "reminded him of favorite lines of Romantic poetry."²¹ Yeats was predisposed to praise and to select those passages of Spenser which so reminded him, since his own memory demonstrated their share in a transhistorical creative community, in the great memory in fact. I will discuss Yeats's selection itself in more detail at the end of this chapter, but it will become evident that his notion of what of Spenser's poetry escaped the inimical forces of Spenser's age remains in many ways a Romantic one. However, this Romantic notion is reached through a complex synthesis of readings and modes of reading.

The writing of the Spenser introduction can be traced through brief but interesting references in the letters of 1902. Yeats first mentions the edition, with guarded enthusiasm in a letter to Lady Gregory of 20th January:²²

I have had a letter from an Edinburgh publisher asking me to edit a book of selections from 'Spenser' for £35. It is good pay & I am writing to ask when it will be wanted. I may do it if I have not to do it at once. I have a good deal to say about Spenser but tremble at the thought of reading his six books.

The "good deal" of comment on Spenser was put into shape in the last three months of the year. Yeats consulted Frederick York Powell, who replied with "a long letter" on allegorical poems which has been lost, and the connection is tantalising, given the range of interests which Powell shared with Yeats.²³ Powell was Regius Professor of modern history at Oxford, a translator of Icelandic saga, and an authority on medieval English literature. He had invited Verlaine and Mallarmé to Oxford, and had been president of the Irish Texts Society. On 7th April 1902 he lectured in Dublin to the Irish Literary Society on Irish influence on English literature, and in December of that year spoke in favour of the endowment of Celtic Studies at the University of Liverpool.²⁴ He sat for a portrait by J B Yeats, knew Lionel Johnson, and encouraged Yeats to write a memorial for

²¹ George Bornstein, "The Making of Yeats's Spenser", *Yeats Annual* 2 (1984), pp.21-29, p.25.

²² *The Collected Letters of W B Yeats*, III, ed. by John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard (Oxford; OUP, 1994), p.148.

²³ *Letters* III, pp.240-241.

²⁴ *DNB*

Johnson after his death on 4th October 1902. Yeats's efforts to consult such an authority do suggest that he was attempting to grasp the literary historical contexts and some contemporary criticism of Spenser.

Mary Turpin reproduces a page of notes in Lady Gregory's hand inserted in one of the volumes of Spenser from which Yeats made his selection.²⁵ These notes offer advice to Yeats on Spenser's place in an allegorical tradition, and they refer to Langland, Dante, Gascoygne, Henryson, Tasso and Ariosto. As I will show, within his introduction Yeats avoids this kind of detail in his account of allegory, denigrating allegorical poetry and suggesting that allegory initiated a movement antipathetic to symbolic tradition. Yeats read Spenser in 1902 in the five volume complete edition, given to him by Lady Gregory.²⁶ As Turpin notes the flyleaf inscription is confusing: "W. B. Yeats / March 1892 / A. G.": this predates Yeats's and Gregory's first meeting, so the date may refer to her original purchase of the edition.²⁷

The publisher of Yeats's selected edition was T. C. and E. C. Jack, and the selection from Spenser formed one of a series, "The Golden Poets". The series also included selections from Keats edited by Arthur Symonds, from Coleridge by Edward Dowden, from Longfellow by George Saintsbury. The general editor of the series was Oliphant Smeaton. The series was delayed and Yeats's Spenser was eventually published in 1906. I can find no evidence that Yeats was responsible for the choice of the art nouveau illustrations by Jessie M. King. The Payne Collier edition was not the publisher's copytext for Yeats's selection: Richard B. Davidson suggests that the copytext was the Globe edition edited by R. Morris with a memoir by John W. Hales, and Wayne K. Chapman agrees with this identification.²⁸

²⁵ Mary Dunbar Turpin, *Yeats and Spenser* an unpublished M.Phil. thesis, (University of Oxford 1995), p.11.

²⁶ *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser*, ed. by J. Payne Collier, 5 vols (London: Bell and Daldy, 1862). Yeats's annotated copy is in the Yeats Library, no.1978-1978D.

²⁷ Turpin pp.2-3.

²⁸ Richard B. Davidson *Yeats's Images of Spenser: A Question of Literary Influence* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Colorado, 1973), p.103, 107. Globe edition: *The Works of Edmund Spenser* ed. by R. Morris with memoir by John W. Hales (London: Macmillan, 1869; rev. 1893 and 1897; repr. 1899 and 1902). Wayne K. Chapman *Yeats and English Renaissance Literature* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p.233: "Yeats's annotated text (Collier) compares with both the Morris and Hale edition and *Wade* 235. All three are close in spelling and punctuation, for Morris and Hales followed Collier in most particulars (noted in Morris's preface). Where there are differences, these favour the Macmillan volume, probably the most available text in 1902."

On 2 December Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory:

These last few days I have been working particularly hard on the history of Allegory. I had no sooner began reading at the British Museum after my return when it flashed upon me that the Coming of Allegory coincided with the rise of the Middle Class. That it was the first effect on literature of the earnest spirit which afterwards created Puritanism. I have been hunting through all sorts of books to verify this and am now certain of it. I at last feel able to copy out and finish the Spenser Essay. But my work at the Museum has made my eyes very feverish again and I don't quite know what to do for the moment.²⁹

As Davidson notes, Yeats allegorises "the Coming of Allegory" even as he deplores it.³⁰ A week later racial and linguistic divisions have been added to the account:

It is full of suggestion and has fine passages I think but it is too incoherent. I am basing the whole thing on my conviction, that England up to the time of the Parliamentary Wars was the Anglo-French nation and that the hitherto conquered Saxon elements rose into power with Cromwell. This idea certainly makes my essay very striking, it enables me to say all kinds of interesting things about that time.³¹

Three days later Yeats asked Lady Gregory for a story "about Finn killing the man of the children of the Danu who burnt Tara to the sound of music" for the Spenser essay. This was not included and we can only guess at the possible relevance to Spenser at which Yeats might have been aiming, but the readiness to use myth as anecdote, aphoristic example or recurrent pattern is another mode of extending relation and contrast in Yeats's prose. The destruction of Tara in the present had been on Yeats's mind that year. He, Moore and Hyde had written a letter to the *Times*, to make a specifically nationalist protest against the irresponsible excavation of the site by English enthusiasts in search of the Ark of the Covenant.³² In "In the Seven Woods" this issue became another image of the decline into a disruptive vulgar age.³³

Another brief digression here may suggest other complexities in the critical and associative processes of Yeats's thought. In a review of Standish O'Grady's *The Flight of the Eagle* in August 1897, Yeats cites this mythic episode in a

²⁹ *Letters* III, p.268.

³⁰ Davidson, p.93.

³¹ *Letters* III, p.270.

³² *UP* II, p294.

³³ "I have forgot awhile
Tara uprooted, and new commonness
Upon the throne and crying about the streets." *VPoems*, p.198.

context which may suggest why he later recalled it, and may also suggest that O'Grady influenced Yeats's stress on access to myth as available to the Elizabethan Irish, and unappreciated by Spenser. Yeats is also perhaps recalling O'Grady's writings on myth which he had found more satisfactory than these Elizabethan outings.

Here and there the commentary is a little obvious, but here and there commentary and style alike are lifted up into an almost lyric simplicity and intensity, and never so truly as when he has to tell of that sea of ancient Celtic legend whose flood-gates he was the first to lift. Red Hugh O'Donnell rides into the North to begin his war upon the Government, "the last great champion of the Gaelic tradition - the foiled champion too - such is the power of the weaving stars;" and as he rides he comes upon Sleive Fuad, most legendary of hills, and Sleive Fuad becomes a person of the history, a symbol of "the Gaelic tradition." "Here Ossian's sire slew the enchanter Alwain, son of Midna, who once a year, to the sound of unearthly music, consumed Taru with magic flames."³⁴

In his review, Yeats sets out his disagreements with O'Grady's versions of Irish history in the Elizabethan period: in brief, he refuses to accept the level of obedience and lack of "racial antagonism" to England which O'Grady attributes to the Irish chiefs. However, he may have recalled and adapted what he reads as O'Grady's portrayal of "a feudal Ireland, with feudal ideas of freedom, struggling against a modern Ireland, with modern ideas of freedom."³⁵ O'Grady's depiction of heroic, passionate Irish Elizabethan heroes and villains has obvious affinities with the more colourful historical imaginings of the Spenser introduction, and particularly with the passage in which Yeats suddenly enters upon a melodramatic description of the escape of Red Hugh. Yeats's observation there that Hugh O'Neil, was "an Oxford man too, a man of the Renaissance" (p.xxi) is also characteristic of O'Grady's addition of details which complicate such melodrama. The interaction of heroic tales with histories is plain in O'Grady's oeuvre: the novel *The Flight of the Eagle* is substantially the same book as *Red Hugh's Captivity: a Picture of Ireland, Social and Political, in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*.³⁶ The latter adds a further narrative at the end. In the first tale in *The Bog of Stars*, another collection of "Stories and Sketches of Elizabethan Ireland", a poetic and visionary Gaelic

³⁴ *UP II*, pp.47-51, p.50. *The Flight of the Eagle* (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1897). The *Bookman* article is full of misspellings of the names in O'Grady's book.

³⁵ *UP II*, p.48.

³⁶ (London: Ward and Downey, 1899).

heroism is specifically contrasted with Spenser's allegorical depiction of Irish rebelliousness, and elsewhere in that book O'Grady emphasises the "pagan" energy of Irish poetry.³⁷ O'Grady perhaps offered less to Yeats in terms of analyses of cultural history than did Pater and Arnold, but his emphasis on passion and access to myth, and his pursuit of heroic exuberance in both history and myth proved engaging. As Yeats comments in this review, for him "O'Grady alone [among historians] has looked for the great tides of passion and thought that are the substance of life." The combination of ancient myth and present actuality is consistent with some of Yeats's other images in the Spenser essay of the apparently perpetual destruction of original national sanctity and social harmony: Tara might have been always already uprooted, or always in the process of being destroyed. It is intriguing to speculate on whether Yeats hoped to use the myth in relation to Lord Grey's policies in Ireland, or to the burning of Spenser's own house, but for once Yeats's synthetic capacities seem to have been frustrated.

By 16 December Yeats was "nearly finished" after considerable re-writing, and on 26th he had "about an hour's work still to do", but had been spending much time avidly reading Nietzsche.³⁸ By 3 January 1903 he had sent the essay to the printer:

It is much saner than it was & yet quite as original. It is all founded now on a single idea - the contrast between Anglo-French England & Anglo Saxon England.³⁹

I will attempt to examine to what extent it is either sane or reliant on a single idea by tracing Yeats's use of shifts and provocative parallelism between national history, poetic detail and archetypal imaginative patterns. I will quote at length, particularly from the beginning of the essay, in order to examine the web of conflicting issues which Yeats introduces, and the extent to which his treatment of Spenser relies on identifying competing contextual movements in Spenser's era and suggesting, though rarely defining, the forms of relation between context and poetry. Some of Yeats's comments on Spenser indicate the functions of his revised opinions on his own early poetry, particularly relating to allegory, to the functions of poetic mythologies and to the detachment or lack of detachment of poetry from

³⁷ *The Bog of Stars* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1893), "Mona-Reulta; or, the Bog of Stars", pp.9-21.

³⁸ *Letters* III, p.279, pp.284-6.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p.294.

contextual forces. Yeats uses context and some rather vague imaginings of cultural developments to divide Spenser's work. As in much literary history, the use of historical context is inconsistent and is necessarily determined by its relation to points which the editor-critic needs to make about the poetry: modes of history are used to explain both Spenser's relation to the crucial developments of his own time and his place in continuing traditions, and as such they ultimately serve the function of justifying Yeats's ambivalence about Spenser. Dense and at times ambiguous, the essay relies on a lack of clarity, over-complication, and the alternation between historical perspectives, while insistently translating its own conflicts and contrasting aims into the terms of the conflicting issues affecting Spenser. The succession of analyses of modes of cultural change seems to be largely Paterian in origin. Spenser "looked out upon the world, now as craftsman, now as connoisseur," and is presented as subject to various moralistic, political, racial and artistic forces. However, the essay is abbreviated and compressed in comparison with any of Pater's presentations of competing movements, and this tends to emphasise pressure and confusion. To an even greater degree than Pater, Yeats tends to attribute to each of these contextual movements their own mechanisms of change; he constantly suggests patterns of growth and decay as if they are immanent and accepted, but they are never fully schematised or rationalised.

A brief comparison of Yeats's introduction with that in the collected edition of Spenser from which he compiled his selection is instructive. In terms of approaches to Spenser's life, Yeats's presentation seems to dwell more on the events described in the early part of that piece, and his defence of Harvey seems to reply to Payne Collier's assertion that "Harvey's taste was unquestionably bad": Yeats reacted against such dogmatic literary criticism in favour of imagining several currents of contemporary thought in the sixteenth century.⁴⁰ The principal differences are stylistic: Yeats generates cross-currents of historical movements where Payne Collier proceeds through a chronological account, and Yeats erases the doubt over historical details and speculations which Payne Collier stresses, albeit inconsistently.

⁴⁰ Payne Collier II, p.xvii.

Yeats's introduction opens with a bare sketch of Spenser's familial antecedents, and balances this with a literary contextualisation by placing his date of birth relative to Ariosto and Tasso as a prelude to a remarkable characterisation of the poet as product of the Renaissance. An autobiographical interjection adds yet another kind of analysis to a mode which affects simplicity, familiarity and sympathy but resists precision in favour of elusive formulations and analogies:

Full of the spirit of the Renaissance, at once passionate and artificial, looking out upon the world now as craftsman, now as connoisseur, he was to found his art upon theirs [Ariosto and Tasso] rather than upon the more humane, the more noble, the less intellectual art of Malory and the minstrels. Deafened and blinded by their influence, as so many of us were in boyhood by that art of Hugo, that made the old simple writers seem but as bread and water, he was always to love the journey more than its end, the landscape more than the man, and reason more than life, and the tale less than its telling. (p.xiii; p.356)

Immediately the oppositions and divisions start to accumulate. The effect is to project a rich and confusing range of concerns at work in a period of change and division. The divisions are linked to the present and then contrasted with it with a suggestion of a wider order of imaginative pattern issuing in changing poetic styles:

To-day a young man translates out of Verlaine and Verhaeren; but at that day Ronsard and Du Bellay were the living poets, who promised revolutionary and unheard-of things to a poetry moving towards elaboration and intellect, as ours - the serpent's tooth in its own tail again - moves towards simplicity and instinct. (p.xiv; p.356)

Yeats casually inserts a mythological image to suggest an assumption of cyclical pattern.⁴¹ The authoritative delineation of repeated imaginative movement describes the limitation of view constricting the poet involved in such movement. Superimposing perspectives, Yeats allows sympathy into his transhistorical comparative technique.

It is usual to think ill of Harvey, because of his dislike of rhyme and his advocacy of classical metres, and because he complained that Spenser preferred his *Faerie Queen* to the Nine Muses, and encouraged Hobgoblin 'to run off with the Garland of Apollo.' But at that crossroad, where so many crowds mingled talking of so many lands, no one could foretell in what bed he would sleep after nightfall. Milton

⁴¹ The ouroboros appears entwined with the figure of Venus as a statue "Farre passing that, which... / *Phidias* did make" in *FQ* IV.x.40. Yeats included the canto in a the selection, but also claimed later in the introduction (xlv-vi) that he witnessed similar scenes to the vision of Scudamour in visions. The image of the serpent of eternity also recurs in *Where There is Nothing; VPlays* p.1081.

was in the end to dislike rhyme as much, and it is certain that rhyme is one of the secondary causes of that disintegration of the personal instincts which has given to modern poetry its deep colour for colour's sake, its overflowing pattern, its background of decorative landscape, and its insubordination of detail. At the opening of a movement we are busy with first principles, and can find out everything but the road we are to go, everything but the weight and measure of the impulse, that has come to us out of life itself, for that is always in defiance of reason, always without a justification but by faith and works. (pp.xiv-xv; p.357)

This style already seems antipathetic to the production of any linear literary history or any narrative account of it. Instead Yeats exercises cycles and diversions, stressing the competition between modes and juxtaposing temporal perspectives to break up narrative and return periodically to defamiliarised analyses of the elements of poetry, analyses which privilege the place of form in literary tradition. By bringing in the "disintegration of the personal instincts" Yeats opens up issues about the relation of poetry to life and to individuality which run through the rest of the essay. This assessment of "colour for colour's sake" also points to qualities which Yeats would continue throughout his career to associate with Spenser, and which he found appealing and of lasting value, but also came to see as both dangerously isolating and dangerously influential.

Spenser's classical metres are accorded a sincerity only possible to him without rhyme; a sincerity which in the next section he is said to have found almost impossible. Yeats seems to see the poet's response to his phase, however obscurely, as a matter of prosody.

The man himself, liberated from the minute felicities of phrase and sound, that are the temptation and the delight of rhyme, speaks of his mistress some thought that came to him not for the sake of poetry, but for love's sake, and the emotion instead of dissolving into detached colours, into 'the spangly gloom' that Keats saw 'froth up and boil' when he put his eyes into 'the pillowy cleft,' speaks to her in poignant words as if out of a tear-stained love-letter. [Quotes ll.1-9 of "Iambicum Trimetrum"] (p.xv; pp.357-8)

Arthur Symons quoted those two lines from "Isabella; or the Pot of Basil" in his essay on Keats, which became an introduction for the same series as Yeats's on Spenser, and it seems quite possible that Yeats may be drawing on Symons's essay for this point.⁴²

⁴² Symons's introduction to *Poems of Keats* (Edinburgh: T. C. & E. C. Jack, 1907) was first published in the *Monthly Review* 5 (October 1901) 139-55. Symons quotes "We put our eyes into a

In the next section, Yeats sets against this a biographical reading of *The Shepherd's Calendar* which concentrates on the problem of sincere expression, in reading as well as in writing, and which seems to project some reflections about Yeats's own career onto Spenser:

Spenser lamented her for years, in verses so full of disguise that one cannot say if his lamentations come out of a broken heart or are but a useful movement in the elaborate ritual of his poetry, a well-ordered incident in the mythology of his imagination. To no English poet, perhaps to no European poet before his day had the natural expression of personal feeling been so impossible, the clear vision of the lineaments of human character so difficult; no other's head and eyes had fallen so far into the pillowy cleft. (p.xvi; pp.358-9)

The contrast is perhaps eccentric, in that the ordered poses of the "Iambicum Trimetrum" might seem to be no more "sincere" than the pastoral mode of the *Calendar*, but the distinction for Yeats may be between a poem in which posed expression of an individual voice dominates, and one in which it forms part of a broader fictive mode. This kind of distinction is perhaps suggestive of Yeats's own capacity to revise "the mythology" of his own imagination, by adopting more direct kinds of pose.

This elaborate and specifically Keatsian separation from human reality was then supplemented by aristocratic and moral example in the next stage of the poet's quest for instruction. Spenser becomes an exemplary seeker after structure and instruction:

One can imagine that it was the great Earl or Sir Philip Sidney that gave his imagination its moral and practical turn, and one imagines him seeking from philosophical men, who distrust instinct because it disturbs contemplation, and from practical men, who distrust everything they cannot use in the routine of immediate events, that impulse and method of creation that can only be learned from the technical criticism of poets, and from the excitement of some movement in the artistic life. (p.xvii; p.359)

Technical instruction is balanced by an appreciation of artistic movements as engaging spiritual experience. Again Yeats may be speaking with the benefit of the experience of his own distractions from the artistic life, in declaring the need to rely primarily on attention to poetic details while remaining open to "excitement".

pillowy cleft, / And see the spangly gloom froth up and boil." as evidence that Keats "was more than a decadent, but he was a decadent" and of "grotesque horror", *Poems of Keats* p.xxiii. Yeats's adoption of the quotation into a term of classification in literary history may involve some recognition of Symonds's sense of morbid decadence here.

This notion of movement remains vague, but it is emphasised by the various kinds of cultural and artistic development which Yeats attributes to Spenser's era in the course of the essay.

The opposition between personal and formally conditioned emotion now becomes gendered:

Spenser's verses about men, nearly always indeed, seem to express more of personal joy and sorrow than those about women, perhaps because he was less deliberately a poet when he spoke of men. At the end of a long beautiful passage he laments that unworthy men should be in the dead Earl's place, and compares them to the fox - an unclean feeder - hiding in the lair 'the badger swept'. (p.xvii; pp.359-60)

The lines from *The Ruines of Time* clearly stayed in Yeats's mind: they are adapted to form a resistance to mourning in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" and a sexual metaphor in *Deirdre*, as I will note below. What Yeats sees as poignant personal emotion is then placed into an ambiguous context in which Spenser's potential gift to literary history has been undermined by his choosing the wrong relation to the events of his time:

The imaginer of the festivals of Kenilworth was indeed the fit patron for him, and alike, because of the strengths and weaknesses of Spenser's art, one regrets that he could not have lived always in that elaborate life a master of ceremony to the world, instead of being plunged into a life that but stirred him to bitterness, as the way is with theoretical minds in the tumults of events they cannot understand. (p.xvii-xviii; p.360)

In this ideal, hypothetical, placing of Spenser, Yeats suggests a conjunction of "personal joy and sorrow" with "that elaborate life". Ten pages later in the introduction, in a passage criticising Spenser's allegories, Yeats reveals his probable source for the central phrase here:

One cannot think that he should have occupied himself with moral questions at all. He should have been, as Emerson thought Shakespeare was, a Master of the Revels to mankind. (p.xxviii; p.368)

As Rupin Desai noted, this implies that "to Yeats, Shakespeare was actually much more."⁴³ The application to Spenser of this notion is ambiguous, like much of the discussion of poetry's relation to power and to events. To describe Spenser as such a master of ceremony suggests his naiveté and limitation, as if he were able to order ceremony but not the greater events of life, but it may also suggest a broader freedom from restraint, as if by becoming involved in the recreations of an

⁴³ Rupin W Desai, *Yeats's Shakespeare* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971), p.37-8.

aristocratic group Spenser would somehow have attained a greater status, or through avoiding his weaknesses found another audience. Yeats promotes a potentially high valuation of artifice and ceremony. The status which he allows to Spenser's potential as master of ceremony is implicitly contrasted later in the introduction with the qualities in Spenser which Yeats deprecates and which made "so many generations believe that he was the first poet laureate, the first salaried moralist among the poets." (p.xxix; p.369).

By setting these two roles in opposition Yeats was constructing a new complex from issues, and from their corresponding terms, which he had considered before. In November 1892 he had contributed to the debate over Tennyson's successor as laureate in a letter to the *Bookman*. Declaring that the only two poets fitted for the post, Morris and Swinburne, would never accept its statutory connection with royalty, Yeats suggests that the laureate should be responsible to the nation rather than the crown. The young poet's confidence to pronounce on this subject is ironised by the admission that his suggestion "has not the slightest chance" of being followed. The cultural history which he appends anticipates some of the issues of the Spenser introduction, but takes a slightly different approach to the vexed question of the relation of art to authority and to events, and to the cultural significance of the aristocracy.

Surely it is time to transform the Laureateship also, and to expect no Laureate in return for his pension and his sherry to do other than celebrate, if he be so minded, for the muses make but indifferent drudges, matters of national importance, great battles if he hold them to be waged in a just cause, the deaths of famous men of thought and action, and the ever-coming never-come light of that ideal peace and freedom whereto all nations are stumbling in the darkness. In the old days the imagination of the world would have fared but ill without its kings and nobles, for in those times, when few could read and pictures were many a mile between, they kept before men's minds a more refined ideal of life than was possible to the small chief in his rush-strewn tower or to the carle in his poor cottage. By a phantasmagoria of royalties and nobilities the soul of the world displayed itself, and whatever there was in the matter of court poet or court pageantry helped it to draw them away from their narrow circle of eating and sleeping, getting and begetting. [...] Thus, at any rate do I, with my perhaps too literary eyes, read history, and turn all into a kind of theatre where the proud walk clad in cloth of gold, and display their passionate hearts, that the groundlings may feel their souls wax the greater. But now no man can say that life displays itself under the best conditions in

royalties and nobilities, for refinement and ample life have gone out into the highways and byways, and the Laureate should go after them, and be their *master of the revels*. [My italics]⁴⁴

Tennyson is acknowledged as a “supreme artist”, but one who marred *The Idylls of the King* by the dedication to the Prince Consort and the Queen,

Because neither represents to us a fuller and a more beautiful kind of life than is possible to any mere subject. [...] We can only just tolerate Spenser’s comparison of the Queen of the Fairies to Queen Elizabeth, for even then all such comparisons were growing obsolete.

By 1902, Yeats had altered some of the elements of the history, and Spenser is castigated far more. As Turpin notes, Yeats’s unpublished notes in 1902 were also harsh: he made a marginal note in his own copy of Spenser at the conclusion of Sonnet LXXX of the *Amoretti* where Spenser presents love as “fit for the handmayd of the Faery Queene”. The note comments tersely: “Insincerity of official poet”.⁴⁵ However, there is some continuity from the earlier position: Spenser’s faults are still products of inappropriate stylistic choices as much as inappropriate political ones: Yeats denies any simple distinction. The central idea of the imaginative function of the aristocracy is adapted, and resuscitated into a new consideration of the socio-imaginative conditions of the present age. All life is still considered in terms of imaginative creativity and performance: revels, epic, theatre. Attention to Yeats’s articulations of this kind of social and imaginative complex avoids some of the dead ends met in the endless critical pursuit of trying to date Yeats’s rehabilitation of the aristocracy and to trace the modulations in his views of the peasantry. It is necessary at least to recognise his own formulations of the place of the imagination in social relations, if not as a constant then certainly as a recurrent motif.

As the introduction proceeds from the failure of Spenser to find his potential role, Yeats asserts that Spenser’s misdirection led to “that conflict between aesthetic and moral interests that was to run through well-nigh all his works”: Yeats’s construction of competitions, interactions and divisions is beginning to develop towards an assessment of what he sees as the major issues. His analysis relies on an identification of “moral interests” as in fact moralistic, expedient and limited by their subordination and specificity to contemporary social

⁴⁴ *Letters I*, p.324-6.

⁴⁵ Turpin, p.26.

and political issues. As in much of *Ideas of Good and Evil*, Yeats does not make a direct assault on moralistic and didactic writing, rather he seeks to section it off as restricted and liable to date, in contrast with critical principles and poetic practices which create communities through imaginative involvement across centuries. However, the equation of “moral” with “moralistic” is polemical. The criticism of Spenser often comes to rest on its implicit contrast with a freedom to connect and produce successions of perspectives which is relativistic in its insistent complication of categories in favour of new analyses and syntheses.

Spenser’s elaboration, his limitations of understanding and the rigidity of his interest in courtly and pastoral conventions are also responsible for his failure to engage imaginatively with Ireland: “He never pictured the true countenance of Irish scenery, for his mind turned constantly to the courts of Elizabeth and to the umbrageous level lands, where his own race was already seeding like a great poppy.” (pp.xviii-xix; p.360) Yeats quotes from *Colin Clouts Come Home Again* (ll.308-321), in which Colin describes England as a pastoral ideal where “Poets wits are had in peerlesse price”, and in contrast to the violence, fear and barbarity of Ireland. By first introducing the pastoral motifs in Spenser’s words, Yeats is suggesting that Spenser’s misapplication of poetic mythology to England prevented him from finding an available pastoral reality in Ireland.

Significantly Yeats’s first objection to the policy advanced by Lord Grey de Wilton and supported by Spenser is that it is ready-made, unresponsive. Taking up the connection between Grey and “Artigall” he emphasises mechanical execution. As Morris’s innocent happiness cuts him off from reality in “The Happiest of the Poets”, Spenser’s ignorance, lack of responsiveness and love of the court explain his adoption of an uncompromising and inhumane political position:

Like an hysterical patient he drew a complicated web of inhuman logic out of the bowels of an insufficient premise - that there was no right, no law, but that of Elizabeth, and all that opposed her opposed themselves to God, to civilisation, and to all inherited wisdom and courtesy, and should be put to death. (pp.xix-xx; p.361)

Spenser, perhaps specifically in contrast to Yeats, lacked the ability to see Ireland and ceremony together, perhaps to unite pastoral fiction with pastoral reality. Turpin states that Yeats’s marginal annotations in the early books of *The Faerie Queene* “reveal an enthusiasm for spotting examples of ‘Irish influence’ or ‘Irish

accentuation’”, whereas there are few annotations at all beyond the Proem to Book V.⁴⁶ Since Yeats also says, in the last section of the introduction, that he had not read as far as the fourth Book “until quite lately”, it seems likely that his encounter with *Artegall* when reading for the edition caused a violent reaction away from poetic sympathy. Intriguingly, the ambivalence in Yeats’s response to Spenser in this edition, and his efforts to explain and to justify that ambivalence, may have a grounding in another contrast of personal, autobiographical, phases. His apparent belief that Spenser fell into politically motivated moralism in mid-career may be a translation of his own response into literary history. That he was appalled is confirmed by the vehemence with which he denies Spenser any real poetic encounter with Ireland and its scenery at all. In this introduction he continues to praise Spenser’s islands, once he has freed them from their allegorical structures, but in his later comments he came to regard their very isolation as dangerous: that too may have been influenced by reaction to the necessity of removing them from Spenser’s intentions.

Yeats’s concern with the potential uses and failures of artificiality suggests a further dilemma in the critical terms which seek to establish a positive function for artifice in Spenser’s work, in transforming actual happiness into beautiful pictures:

He married a fair woman of his neighbourhood, and about her he wrote many intolerable artificial sonnets and that most beautiful passage in the sixth book of the ‘*Faerie Queen*’, which tells of Colin Clout piping to the Graces and to her; and he celebrated his marriage in the most beautiful of all his poems, the ‘*Epithalamium*’. His genius was pictorial, and these pictures of happiness were more natural to it than any personal pride or joy or sorrow. His new happiness was very brief, and just as he was rising to something of Milton’s grandeur in the fragment that has been called ‘*Mutabilitie*,’ ‘the wandering companies that keep the woods,’ as he called the Irish armies, drove him to his death. (p.xx; p.362)

The fragility of these poetic fictions in the face of facts confirms, for Yeats, Spenser’s failure to establish a stable and productive relation between poetry and events. At this point Yeats moves beyond his initial fragments of idiosyncratic historical analysis to stress profound racial, national and cultural struggles. The

⁴⁶ Turpin, pp.4-5.

final stage of the biography emphasises Spenser's powerlessness in a new historical context by portraying him as a victim of a general cultural conflict:

Ireland, where he saw nothing but work for the Iron Man, was in the midst of the last struggle of the old Celtic order with England, itself about to turn bottom upward, of the passion of the Middle Ages with the craft of the Renaissance. (pp.xx-xxi; p.362)

With some exuberance and excitement, Yeats traces some of the events in this "last struggle", but brings that narrative back to Spenser with another fatal conjunction of writing, reading and action which produced another symbolic ruin and another traditional account of frustrated tradition:

The Irish, stirred by these events, and with it maybe some rumours of 'The State of Ireland' sticking in their stomachs, drove Spenser out of doors and burnt his house, one of his children, as tradition has it, dying in the fire. (pp.xxi-xxii; p.363)

To a much greater degree than his Shakespeare, Yeats's Spenser is shaped by his time and his inability to perceive and shape it himself. McAlindon observes that Yeats assists his analysis by preferring Jonson's tragic version to accepted accounts of Spenser's death.⁴⁷ As David Gardiner notes, George Sigerson had used Jonson's account of Spenser's penurious death to contrast his position with the higher social standing of Irish bards: legendary poetic biography can be translated into exempla for promotion of national conflicts and contrasts.⁴⁸ Yeats did generally prefer history by poets, and particularly history about poets by Jonson, and his literary histories rely on the priority given to poets' histories, but his choice of Jonson's version may also have been prompted by a more simple fact: it is the account preferred in the introduction to the edition of Spenser from which Yeats compiled his selection. Payne Collier also saw the destruction of Spenser's house as a retaliation for Spenser's published opinions.⁴⁹

Yeats's own ambiguous attitude to the development of the Renaissance leads him to see Elizabethan verse as a beginning, but, in a compressed account complicated rather than elucidated by the allusion to Blake, is the beginning of a phase which is itself only the beginning of an end:

⁴⁷ McAlindon, p.161n: "Jonson's sensational assertion regarding the manner of Spenser's death was regarded as unreliable long before 1902, [...] but Yeats presented it as fact since it suited his particular view of the Spenser phenomenon."

⁴⁸ Gardiner, p.24; Sigerson, *Bards of the Gael and the Gall: Examples of the Poetic Literature of Erin, done into English after the metres and modes of the Gael* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1897), p.87.

⁴⁹ Payne Collier, I, p.lxxxix; pp.lxxvii-lxxviii.

During the last four or five years of his life he had seen, without knowing that he saw it, the beginning of the great Elizabethan poetic movement. In 1598 he had pictured the Nine Muses lamenting each one over the evil state in England, of the things that she had in charge, but, like William Blake's more beautiful 'Whether on Ida's snowy brow,' their lamentations should have been a cradle song. (p.xxii; p.363)

Poetry and poetic modes become significant history, but Yeats pushes them together to the point of obscurity. The insistence on movement and decay seems at once necessary and antipathetic to the production of a new formulation of a cultural condition. The motif of cultural flowering before an imminent ending recurs in various forms in Yeats's work, but it does seem to be particularly associated with Spenser.

When he died 'Romeo and Juliet,' 'Richard III.,' and 'Richard II.,' and the plays of Marlowe had all been acted, and in stately houses were sung madrigals and love songs whose like has not been in the world since. Italian influence had strengthened the old French joy that had never died out among the upper classes, and an art was being created for the last time in England which had half its beauty from continually suggesting a life hardly less beautiful than itself. (p.xxii; pp.363-4)

In apparent enthusiasm for the analyses which he was achieving with ideas of change and division of phase, Yeats effectively allows no sustained existence for any of the cultural periods which he so elaborately describes. As the sentences turn around on themselves, moving towards descriptions of movements and then curtailing them, successive expressions of time generate formulations of an interchange between lasting art and enriched life against a context of imminent mortality and conclusion. The equivalence between art and life occurs at a doomed still point.

Spenser's own death brought England closer to this end in a change marked by Puritanism and moral zeal. In a bizarre comparison, Yeats relates the actions of poets at Spenser's burial, taking their gesture of throwing poems and pens into the tomb as itself expressive of an era passing:

Like him they belonged, for all their moral zeal that was gathering like a London fog, to that indolent, demonstrative Merry England that was about to pass away. Men still wept when they were moved, still dressed themselves in joyous colours, and spoke with many gestures. Thoughts and qualities sometimes come to their perfect expression

when they are about to pass away,⁵⁰ and Merry England was dying in plays, and in poems, and in strange adventurous men. (p.xxiii; p.364)
 The fog implicitly associates Puritanism and repression with urbanisation and with a more modern London. Yeats then imagines one of Spenser's mourners arriving in the present and being appalled by "the triumph of the Puritan and the merchant", "and he would weep perhaps, in that womanish way of his, to think that so much greatness had been, not as he had hoped, the dawn, but the sunset of a people." The reader of the introduction could be forgiven for being equally misled about whether a dawn or a sunset is at issue here, the different phasal analyses follow so closely upon each other, interspersed with some contrived returns to the present, and to the potential presence of the past.

This people at its sunset was the fading Anglo-French feudal nation. For Yeats, their quarrel with the moralistic Anglo-Saxon nation "arising amid Puritan sermons", in contrast to the gentler literary modes which defined their predecessors, marks all Elizabethan writing: though he deplores the change, Yeats also allows conflict as a constituent of poetry. He characterises the qualities both literary and social which were at issue in this conflict: following the displacement of French by English, "beautiful, haughty imagination" was supplanted by "earnestness and logic", "abandon and wilfulness" by the "timidity and reserve of a counting-house." The imaginative and social aspects are not just parallel, the loss of the earlier mode of both is a loss of an expressiveness which came near to uniting life and art. With Spenser at the focus of this analysis, Yeats displaces Shakespeare back towards the old nation, in contrast to the ambivalent placing of him in "At Stratford-on-Avon":

Shakespeare, with his delight in great persons, with his indifference to the State, with his scorn of the crowd, with his feudal passion, was of the old nation, and Spenser, though a joyless earnestness had cast shadows upon him, and darkened his intellect wholly at times, was of the old nation too. (p.xxiv; p.365)

Yeats then turns to a contrast with Bunyan. Hazlitt had suggested this parallel, but Yeats turns comparison to disjunction:⁵¹

⁵⁰ Chapman notes the similarity of this sentiment to the first sentence of Pater's essay on Coleridge: "Forms of intellectual and spiritual culture sometimes exercise their subtlest and most artful charms when life is already passing from them." Pater *Appreciations* (London: Macmillan, 1889), p.64; Chapman, p.41. The similarity in leisurely and suggestive confidence extends to several of Yeats's formulations of cultural history.

⁵¹ Hazlitt, p.44.

Bunyan's men would do right that they might come to the Delectable Mountain, and not at all that they might live happily in a world whose beauty was an entanglement about their feet. Religion had denied the sacredness of an earth that commerce was about to corrupt and ravish, but when Spenser lived the earth had still its sheltering sacredness. (pp.xxiv-v; p.365)

Yeats intensifies the race-conflict theory by combining it with a version of the Golden Age complex: a notion characterised by original unities, harmony of physicality and spirituality, the sacredness of place and unrestrained imagination. By making the English past into a country foreign to later and present England, this synthesis moves towards an association of the old Anglo-French nation with Ireland, and disrupts any sense of English poetic traditions as necessarily continuous or consistent. Placing Spenser in conflict with a new England also temporarily distracts from his political opinions on Ireland, indeed suggests that sympathy for Ireland should have been more natural to him.

His religion, where the paganism that is natural to proud and happy people had been strengthened by the platonism of the Renaissance, cherished the beauty of the soul and the beauty of the body with, as it seemed, equal affection. He would have men live well, not merely that they might win eternal happiness but that they might live splendidly among men and be celebrated in many songs. (p.xxv; p.365)

Spenser's creation of beauty now becomes a celebration of joy in life rather like that of Yeats's Morris. As in the essay on Morris a kind of aesthetics of eschatology becomes the means of definition. The religio-aesthetic terms and the suggestion of an ideal original paganism within Spenser's religious beliefs undervalues not just Spenser's specific religious allegiances, but all the Christian allegiances, issues and conflicts of that or any period. A selective summary of some of Spenser's poetic mythologies picks out elements which Yeats adapted in both his earlier and later work, and by stressing Spenser's heterodoxy, perhaps explains something of the appeal of these myths for Yeats himself:

And in his 'Hymn to Heavenly Beauty' he sets a woman little known to theology, one that he names Wisdom or Beauty, above Seraphim and Cherubim and in the very bosom of God, and in the 'Faerie Queen' it is pagan Venus and her lover Adonis who create the forms of all living things and send them out into the world, calling them back again to the gardens of Adonis at their lives' end to rest there, as it seems, two thousand years between life and life. (pp.xxv-xxvi; p.366)

A feminised ideal of wisdom and/or beauty is raised above other doctrines and, crucially for Yeats, syncretic myth provides a model source of recurrent forms.

Platonism and Intellectual Beauty lead to Shelley, but even in this sub-tradition inheritance goes through another change in its orientation towards life:

He began in English poetry, despite a temperament which delighted in sensuous beauty alone with perfect delight, that worship of Intellectual Beauty which Shelley carried to a much greater subtlety and applied to the whole of life. (p.xxvi; p.366)

Yeats brings this strains of cultural history to a close with a return to the moral conflict and its practical poetic effects:

Born at the moment of change, Spenser had indeed many Puritan thoughts. [...] [But] Puritanism, its zeal and its narrowness, and the angry suspicion that it had in common with all movements of the ill-educated, seemed no other to him than a slanderer of all fine things. One doubts, indeed, if he could have persuaded himself that there could be any virtue at all without courtesy, perhaps without something of pageant and eloquence. (pp.xxvi-xxvii; p.367)

Daniel Harris suggests that

Courtesy, the indispensable art which "spreads it selfe through all civilitie" (*Faerie Queene*, VI, Prologue), was Spenser's barrier against internal and cultural chaos, and it became Yeats's.⁵²

However, Yeats allows some ambivalence here: Spenser is a poet of courtesy, but too delicate to resist forces of deleterious change. At his best, Spenser's finer and more personal qualities are defined by the unity of morality and aesthetics, and by a performative conjunction of art and life. The pollution of these qualities is a function of forces of change which are equally active in art and in society. The Renaissance in England seems to signal a fall into a particular kind of social history, but by tying this to allegory, Yeats is forced to back-date it, since he can hardly claim that allegory was new to English poetry in Spenser's lifetime. The history of England here is beginning to be one in which commercial and middle class interests are perpetual insurgents, always in the process of gaining control.

He wrote of knights and ladies, wild creatures imagined by the aristocratic poets of the twelfth century, and perhaps chiefly by English poets who had still the French tongue; but he fastened them with allegorical nails to the big barn door of common sense, of merely practical virtue. Allegory itself had risen into general importance with the rise of the merchant class in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; and it was natural when that class was about for the first time to shape an age in its image, that the last epic poet of the old order should mix its art with his own long descended, irresponsible and happy art. (p.xxvii; p.367)

⁵² Daniel A. Harris, *Yeats, Coole Park and Ballylee* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p.34.

In these first three sections Yeats has placed Spenser in the excitement of a dawning age and at the last flowering of an age reaching its greatest beauty before passing away; he has been a politically thoughtless craftsman attempting to obey new moral codes and an initiator of intellectual beauty while only really skilled with sensuous beauty. Some of the motifs are familiar from Romantic criticism of Spenser, particularly Hazlitt, but the variety of tangential definitions is surely remarkable. The passing of the Anglo-French nation with the rise of Puritanism may be the most heavily emphasised idea, but the essay resists summary and fails to deliver a single “view” of Spenser: rather it enacts some of the conflicts it describes in offering a Spenser broken into sections. Neither does Spenser provide a simple projection of one Yeatsian crisis, but rather an interchange between several. The terms which Yeats chooses for articulating the place of the individual poet in his era describe negotiations through various modes of responsiveness and irresponsibility.

To posit one “dissociation of sensibility” may be a useful means of antedating perceived divisions, and may offer some co-ordinates to allow a modern poet to place new work in relation to tradition and to suggest what may be re-made or regained. Variations of these negotiations recur in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, and they inform Yeats’s treatments of poetics in terms of the restoration to kinds of unity: of culture, between beliefs and mythologies, of literary and popular audience, between social classes. To posit several dissociations in the life and work of a forebear and in different and even conflicting characterisations of an earlier period seems wilfully chaotic, but may be more enabling. By locating a model in a prior and superseded phase of cultural history and by discounting certain aspects as determined by the era, a successor may justify the process of selection and adaptation which will allow heritage to contribute to new poetry in the later phase. When Yeats also creates the characterisation of historical period and does so in determinedly idiosyncratic terms, and as so many kinds of phase, a much greater control can be applied in the selection of what constitutes a poetic legacy, particularly when so much of the essay is about the metamorphosis of tradition in Spenser’s age.

Kermode cites other analogous dissociations of sensibility, and Chapman suggests that Eliot’s “judgment, in fact, was something of a Victorian

commonplace.”⁵³ Kermode’s account of the attempts made to place the dissociation historically, including Eliot’s own reassessment of his first position, provides a useful contrast with Yeats’s versions, particularly in the recognition that the motif involves “an implicit parallel with the Fall,” “an interesting primitivism”, and the practical conclusion that “it would be quite as reasonable to locate the great dissociation in the sixteenth or the thirteenth century as in the seventeenth; nor would it be difficult to construct arguments for other periods.” As he adds, referring to Yeats’s more developed cyclical histories, “only on some such theory as Yeats’s can it occur more than once.”⁵⁴ However, at this stage of Yeats’s career, the broader cyclical theory remained only a possibility, and anyway it requires a rather larger temporal scope than would be appropriate to the series of dissociations posited both in this essay and in the variety of analyses which Kermode cites. Yeats is exceptional among critics, poets and historians in his cavalier disregard for consistency, indeed in his eagerness to overlay one conflict or division with another. That he chose to codify his histories at a later date should not obscure the functions of these histories in the period when he developed his initial enthusiasm for them. Kermode’s analysis of the usefulness of positing a dissociation of sensibility in the past for writers constructing a Symbolist poetic clearly applies in some measure to Yeats, but does not account for his plethora of historical metaphors. Yeats’s variety of social and racial modes, and his overt manipulations of the motif of a poetic golden age, allowed him endlessly to reconstruct cultural traditions. Indeed, movements which he deplores seem to be those which resist manipulation: his approach to religious authority is less a sectarian or doctrinal one than a regret in the face of the advent of a religious movement which he cannot reconcile with paganism and synthesis. His treatment of poetry as significant history goes much further than a Symbolist poetic, and articulates a more complex relation of poetry to events. Isolation of the Symbolist poet remains a possibility, but a potential pagan spiritual priesthood may be available also: community and the poet’s relation to community remain variables at this stage of his historiography. The poetic principle of access to eternity and the existence of the anima mundi

⁵³ Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), pp.138-161; Chapman, pp.32-3.

⁵⁴ Kermode, pp.141, 146, 142, 144-5.

mean that an escape from history always beckons, but is also always mediated by poetic histories. Kermode identifies many of the unspoken moral and cultural frameworks behind the various dissociations posited by other writers, but these are simply nearer the surface in Yeats's work: Yeats synthesises almost compulsively. The manipulation of dissociations of sensibility offers him the capacity to choose between traditions, and to rearrange them. Yeats modifies the notion that the Renaissance is the rise of individualism, and rather awkwardly sees the original age of communal imaginative unity as expressively individual, and the rise of "academic morality" with Puritanism and a utilitarian attitude to art as the end of it and of expressive life and as the beginning of imaginative dispersal. By allowing the undivided expressive state to last until this period, Yeats is forced to tread carefully: only the elaborate organicist addition that movements come to fullness as they are about to pass away allows him to see the Elizabethans, dramatists and aristocrats, as both the highest and last point. The advent of less desirable forces has to mean both an imposed spiritual homogeneity and a lack of "real" community: the end of a time when a whole society corresponded to patterns of imagination.

Blake is still a major influence on Yeats's poetic historiography here, if by now a thoroughly modified influence. Yeats seeks examples of the false imposition of religious authority onto an original state, both in history and in the individual, with an uncertain relation of patterns between the two. The connotations of that state may have gained some of their paganism from Pater, but Yeats has more national and imaginative elements to add to that: as much of *Ideas of Good and Evil* and of his early references to common symbols suggest, he disperses classicism among other cultural sources. Pater seems to have influenced Yeats's finesse in imagining periods or moments when the intensity of life and art may have been equivalent, and served as a model for a prose style incorporating sentences which, like phases they describe, are perpetually on the way to becoming something, vacillating and elaborating, suggesting and eluding a totality of definition.

For Yeats, even more than for earlier Romantic critics, the division and selection of Spenser's work involves a low estimation of allegory, and the excision of the wider structures which make it coherent. Didactic writing and moralistic

interpretation are presented as an obstacle to the creation and reception of aesthetically effective poetry. In an earlier editorial venture, Yeats had exercised his editorial authority in removing allegorical structure from a poem in his selection *A Book of Irish Verse*.⁵⁵ In the fourth section of the Spenser essay he contrasts allegory with symbolism. Initially the distinction is one of degree, but it later becomes one of kind. The visionary allegory of Dante becomes a standard beside which Spenser fails:

Spenser, on the other hand, to whom allegory was not, as I think, natural at all, makes us feel again and again that it disappoints and interrupts our preoccupation with the beautiful and sensuous life he has called up before our eyes. [...] I am certain that he never gets that visionary air which can alone make allegory real, except when he writes out of a feeling for glory and passion. He had no deep moral or religious life. [...] He had been made a poet by what he had almost learnt to call his sins. If he had not felt it necessary to justify his art to some serious friend, or perhaps even to 'that rugged forehead,' he would have written all his life long, one thinks, of the loves of shepherdesses and shepherds, among whom there would have been perhaps the morals of the dovecot.

Yeats closes his selection from Spenser with the conclusion of the "December" eclogue, although without Spenser's concluding "square" poem and motto, perhaps confirming this regret over Spenser's progression from pastoral: the end of pastoral becomes the end of Spenser. Spenser's obedience to controlling moralism has produced a history of audience reaction:

One is persuaded that his morality is official and impersonal - a system of life which it was his duty to support - and it is perhaps a half understanding of this that has made so many generations believe that he was the first poet laureate, the first salaried moralist among the poets. (pp.xxviii-xxix; pp.368-9)

Again, the beliefs of "many generations" may be a transmutation of Yeats's own earlier and less informed opinions.

Only amoral excitements truly inspired Yeats's Spenser, and his limitations even there are sustained by remarkable generalisation about personality types:

He was not passionate, for the passionate feed their flame in wanderings and absences, when the whole being of the beloved, every little charm of body and soul, is always present to the mind, filling it with heroic subtleties of desire. (p.xxx; p.370)

⁵⁵ Edward O'Shea, *Yeats as Editor* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1975), p.24. *A Book of Irish Verse* selected from modern writers with an introduction and notes by W B Yeats (London: Methuen, 1893).

He is again “a poet of the delighted senses”, and Keats and Morris are Spenser’s true judges, their authority as poets and imitators transcending that of Spenser’s moralistic political masters. Allegory is one limitation, and Spenser is also unaware of the limitations of his real ability, denying them fulfilment until later poets could recognise and reapply them. These limitations may be assessed through a poetic succession assembled by Yeats, and interpreted by a poetic manipulation of history. Yeats is acknowledging that Spenser had successors within an English tradition, but it is a tradition removed from much that he characterises as England, it is itself characterised by the depiction of isolated imaginative regions, and would in Yeats’s later comments on Spenser become a pattern of isolation for those poets who followed it.

The fifth section pursues the accusation that Spenser’s elaborate mythologising of the queen constituted moralistic time-serving, and Yeats may be offering a difficult distinction between deplorable praise of aristocracy for its power, and the praise of Leicester which he commends, praise of the great who have impressed themselves on the poet’s imagination. Again, this is referred to a standard of imaginative community. The criticism of obedience to state morality returns the essay to the present again, where State morality has become the spurious unity of the newspapers, like that described in the Shakespeare essay and like the false forms of community criticised through *Ideas of Good and Evil*: “those modern thoughts that we share with large numbers are confident and very insolent” (p.xxxii). The contrast of eternal and temporal concerns which runs through that collection here defines the contrast between Spenser and the Elizabethan dramatists as a contrast between didactic and individually expressive poetry:

Their imagination driven hither and thither by beauty and sympathy, put on something of the nature of eternity. Their subject was always the soul, the whimsical, self-awakening, self-exciting, self-appeasing soul. They celebrated its heroical, passionate will going by its own path to immortal and invisible things. Spenser, on the other hand, except among those smooth pastoral scenes and lovely effeminate islands that have made him a great poet, tried to be of his time, or rather of the time that was all but at hand. Like Sidney, whose charm it may be led many into slavery, he persuaded himself that we enjoy Virgil because of the virtues of Æneas, and so planned out his immense poem that it would set before the imagination of citizens, in whom there would be no great energy, innumerable blameless Æneases. (p.xxxi; pp.370-1)

This thinking to order is another explanation of Spenser's and other English failures to appreciate Ireland and the unfettered imagination available to the Irish, who were like Virgilian and Theocritan pastoral in action, and whose poets had access to a pan-national imaginative resource. Again, the poet is symptomatic and symbolic of wider national imaginative failure, and as such has betrayed his own talent:

He was the first of many Englishman to see nothing but what he was desired to see. Could he have gone there as a poet merely, he might have found among its poets more wonderful imaginations than even those islands of Phaedria and Acrasia. He would have found among wandering story-tellers not indeed his own power of rich, sustained description, for that belongs to lettered ease, but he would have found there, still unfaded, the kingdom of Faerie, of which his own poetry was often but an image in a broken mirror. He would have met with, at his own door, story-tellers among whom the perfection of Greek art was indeed as unknown as his own power of detailed description, but who, none the less, imagined or remembered beautiful incidents and strange, pathetic outcrying that made them of Homer's lineage. (pp.xxxii-iii; p.372)

Yeats is determined to claim the poetic trope of the Golden Age as a real and available resource in the Ireland of the past and perhaps of the present. The imaginative kingdom of Faerie, only imperfectly reflected in Spenser's work, is set up against Spenser's controlling State in another perpetual opposition. At this stage of his career, Yeats seems unaware of the potential irony of his accusing Spenser of not being Irish enough, and of his complaint that Spenser's pastoral myths and fictions involved no receptivity to the real peasantry. Yeats's own capacity to respond to selected portions of English poetry provides an implicit contrast with what he finds in Spenser. Spenser's failure is also conditioned by an archetypal, immanent, imaginative pattern which presumably lies in wait for any national art: "Is not all history but the coming of that conscious art which first makes articulate and then destroys the old wild energy?" (p.xxxiii; pp.372-3). Yeats's literalism in terms of pastoral imagery allows him to suggest that in advocating violent suppression in Ireland, Spenser was destroying what could have been his poetic resources:

Spenser, the first poet struck with remorse, the first poet who gave his heart to the state, saw nothing but disorder, where the mouths that have spoken all the fables of the poets had not yet become silent. All about him were shepherds and shepherdesses still living the life that made

Theocritus and Virgil think of shepherd and poet as the one thing; but though he dreamed of Virgil's shepherds he wrote a book to advise, among many like things, the harrying of all that followed flocks upon the hills, and of all 'the wandering companies that keep the woods.' (pp.xxxiii-iv; p.373)

Yeats then cites Spenser's appreciation of the beauty of the landscape in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, but juxtaposes that appreciation with some of the most brutal recommendations and the notorious passage on the Munster famine. This bare juxtaposition derives suppression directly from imaginative failure. David Gardiner rightly suggests that Yeats's account of Spenser's failure to respond to the poetics of Ireland recalls "the notion of the Celtic element as explained by Matthew Arnold and Ernest Renan."⁵⁶ Here, this unused access to a source of poetic energy is presented as a potential corrective to political violence. In adapting Arnold, Yeats employs Ireland as an unchanging chronotope, as he does more overtly in "The Celtic Element in Literature", but also adjusts Arnold's racial types to depict a Saxon, and particularly a Saxon engaged in imperial projects, characterised by his utilitarian brutality.

The original condition which Yeats attributes to Ireland has its implications for language, since the Four Masters "belonged to the old individual, poetical life, and spoke a language, even, in which it was all but impossible to think an abstract thought." (p.xxxvii; p.375) In contrast, service to the state is considered as service to abstract ideas. The imaginative responsiveness and assimilation of the Anglo-French conquerors and settlers is contrasted with their Anglo-Saxon successors, culminating in Cromwell, who is both Cairbry Cat Head and the Great Demagogue.

Metaphor keeps pushing towards archetype in these interactions of imaginative and political histories, and the English and Irish histories alternate between continuing decline, suggestions of cyclical pattern, the recurrence of personality types and a constantly beleaguered condition. As Richard McCabe notes, Grey's policies did indeed anticipate Cromwell's in certain respects: Yeats extrapolates from this to explicate a perpetual repetition as historical pattern and as demonstration of recurrent personal and racial trait.⁵⁷ As an agent of the destruction of "old, individual poetical life, as it seems, for ever", Cromwell is imagined as an

⁵⁶ Gardiner, p.21.

approving reader of Spenser, who becomes the last king of the old race seeing in a mirror the kings of the mob who would succeed him. As McAlindon observes, Spenser has almost become Richard II here.⁵⁸ The interaction of history and art attributes to art the formation of transhistorical patterns and prophecies. Yeats's marginalia on Book II, cantos ix and x, suggest an intense interest in Spenser's histories. Beside II.ix.st.57, lines 1-4, in the description of Eumnestes prior to the "chronicle of Briton kings", he commented "memory not individual - is castle [?] is an individual".⁵⁹ Aside from Yeats's wrestling with reading the allegory, this may suggest an attempt to find in Spenser a poetic account of a communal transhistorical memory. In the next canto, Yeats added in the margin when these names or analogues of them occur: "Brutus", "Lochrine", "Huddibras", "King Lear", "Celtica not Celtic", "Cumbeline", "Joseph of Arimethy", "Uther Pendragon", (at st.68 "End of History of England"), "Prometheus". Apparently noting what was familiar, Yeats read the chronicle with Shakespeare and other English poetry to guide him. At the end of canto x he noted "nothing here I give but should speak of historian stanzas as a poetical canon".⁶⁰ He did not include this section in the selection, but his comments on Spenser as if on Richard II suggest both a preoccupation with poetry as significant history and a disappointment with Spenser's application of it and conclusion of it. Indeed, Yeats seems to need to find in Spenser hiatus rather than continuity.

At the end of this introduction, Yeats recalls his own visions of symbolic processions, as he does in *Ideas of Good and Evil*. He thus claims a capacity in common with Spenser, but places Spenser in a curtailed line of poetic vision, making him a visionary witness to the end of vision in England. In contrast to Spenser, the dramatists were untroubled by politics, "the states that touched them nearly were the States where Helen and Dido had sorrowed." (p.xxxviii; p.376) This rather ludicrous assessment of the Elizabethan theatre again suggests Spenser's failure to achieve autonomy from the repressive and militaristic cultural

⁵⁷ Richard A. McCabe, "The Fate of Irena: Spenser and Political Violence", in *Spenser and Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. by Patricia Coughlan, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1989), p.119.

⁵⁸ McAlindon, p.160.

⁵⁹ I am indebted for these details to Mary Turpin's own notes of Yeats's marginalia, here Payne Collier II, p.258.

⁶⁰ Payne Collier II p.286.

forces of his time. The dramatists are closer to the song of “mother earth singing in her cornfields”, although the lines which Yeats attributes to mother earth here are actually from a song in Robert Greene’s novel *Menaphon*.

Section VII returns to a conception of Spenser as “a man of an older, more imaginative time”, in the milieu in which the unity of work and beauty seems to derive from Morris’s middle ages. Yeats provides yet another amalgam of poetic traditions, or perhaps suggests a lost period in which poetic traditions could be one across chronological history:

A time before undelighted labour had made the business of man a desecration. He carries one’s memory back to Virgil’s and Chaucer’s praise of trees, and to the sweet-sounding song made by the old Irish poet in their praise. (p.xxxix; p.377)

Returning to pictorialism like Hazlitt, but through a personal anecdote, Yeats contrasts Spenser and Shelley through a comparison of “Claude’s ‘Mill’” and “Turner’s ‘Temple of Jupiter’” as the worlds of Colin Clout and of Alastor.⁶¹ The contrast suggests a compensation for the loss of the Spenserian pastoral in “the religion of the wilderness, the only religion possible to poetry to-day.” Shelley’s “religious exaltation” emphasises the distinction, but Yeats also complicates it by remembering that Shelley and Spenser used the image of the star in similar ways. The persistence of images is allowed as well as a major shift in the use of imagery. Yeats consistently breaks down the histories which he has created, and cuts across them with pronouncements on the immanent conditions of visionary experience: “has not the wilderness been at all times a place of prophecy?” (pxl; p.378)

The contrast between Shelley and Spenser, which is also a comparison between Spenser and the accumulation of poets and poetic movements which succeeded his age, is pursued through Yeats’s other habitual standard for characterising poetic history: rhythm. Rhythm manifests the conjunction of linguistic, social and symbolic issues, and expresses the new relations of poetry to life and to time on the grand and on the minute scale:

Our poetry, though it has been a deliberate bringing back of the Latin joy and the Latin love of beauty, has had to put off the old marching rhythms, that once delighted more than expedient hearts, in separating itself from a life where servile hands have become powerful. It has ceased to have any burden for marching shoulders, since it learned

⁶¹ Chapman notes that Ruskin frequently uses the “Temple of Jupiter” in comparisons to Turner’s credit, p.234 note 45. Yeats persistently read “Alastor” as the name of Shelley’s quester.

ecstasy from Smart in his mad cell, and from Blake, who made joyous little songs out of almost unintelligible visions, and from Keats, who sang of a beauty so wholly preoccupied with itself that its contemplation is a kind of lingering trance. The poet, if he would not carry burdens that are not his and obey the orders of servile lips, must sit apart in contemplative indolence playing with fragile things. (pp.xl-xli; p.378)

A stanza of "Laon and Cythna" is quoted for contrast with Spenser, because it is "story-telling and runs nearer to Spenser than the meditative Adonais", but presumably also for formal reasons.

The rhythm is varied and troubled, and the lines, which are in Spenser like bars of gold thrown ringing one upon another, are broken capriciously... It [the meaning in Shelley's poem] is bound together by the vaguest suggestion, while Spenser's verse is always rushing on to some preordained thought. 'A popular poet' can still indeed write poetry of the will, just as factory girls wear the fashion of hat or dress the moneyed classes wore a year ago, but 'popular poetry' does not belong to the living imagination of the world. (p.xli-ii; p.379)

Yeats is more direct on this point than he had been in "What is Popular Poetry?"

Reaching for yet another set of terms for analysis, he asserts that it is the sanguineous temperament attributed by "old writers" to men of active life which is fading "out of poetry and most obviously out of what is most subtle and living in poetry - its pulse and breath, its rhythm."

Because poetry belongs to that element in every race which is most strong, and therefore most individual, the poet is not stirred to imaginative activity by a life which is surrendering its freedom to ever new elaboration, organisation, mechanism. Every generation has more and more loosened the rhythm, more and more broken up and disorganised, for the sake of subtlety or detail, those great rhythms which move, as it were, in masses of sound. Poetry has become more spiritual, for the soul is of all things the most delicately organised, but it has lost in weight and measure and in its power of telling long stories and of dealing with great and complicated events. (pp.xlii-iii; p.380)

Morris is a partial, and notable exception to this general trend, but still lacks "energetic pleasure" and rhythmical will. Yeats tries to assess the results of withdrawal from public events, perhaps seeking some return to the possibility of "active will". Among the varied kinds of fashion and change which inform Yeats's writing in this period, rhythm recurs as the textual detail of poetry's encounter with time and so it becomes the defining condition of a poet's place in an era and in a tradition beyond it.

The final section describes the selection itself. Rather disingenuously Yeats claims to include “only those passages from Spenser that I want to remember and carry about”. Allegory is again dismissed, this time as boring and through another allusion to Blake, with a few exceptions where allegory out of context can be said to become symbolism, passages “that have enough ancient mythology, always an implicit symbolism,” or “enough sheer passion”. The vision of Scudamour is included and praised as one of those visionary excerpts by which “one is persuaded that they had some strange purpose and did truly appear in just that way to some mind worn out with war and trouble.” Yeats relates a recurrent vision of his own which he only recently discovered to be “the enchanted persecution of Amoret”, not remembering that he had read it as a boy. In intense poetic passages, Spenser is sufficiently visionary to join the company of Blake and Yeats and offer perpetually repeating visions with them in a transhistorical imaginative community. Yeats is at pains to bring his critical account close to the kind of ideals of imaginative potential which he promotes in the essay “Magic”. Mary Turpin suggests that Yeats’s descriptions here seem to confuse and combine different passages from Spenser, as they link those passages to personal visions.⁶² His description in the selection of the Temple of Venus as “The House of Friendship” also increases this confusion. Precision of detail and interpretation are certainly subordinate to the principle of synthesis of visions.

The vision of Scudamour, so visionary, so full of a ghostly midnight animation, [...] the finest invention in Spenser. [...] I would think suddenly ‘out of that door might come a procession of strange people doing mysterious things with tumult. They would walk over the stone floor, then suddenly vanish, and everything would become silent again.’ [...] I was alone in a great church watching ghostly kings and queens setting out upon their unearthly business. [...] I found I had been imagining over and over the enchanted persecution of Amoret. (pp.xlv-vi; pp.382-3)

Finally the gardens of Adonis and of Phaedria and Acrasia, examples of “bodily happiness and bodily beauty” aside from moral purpose, are described as examples of “indolent pleasure”, “dateless leisure and unrepining peace.”

⁶² Turpin, pp.68-70.

Perhaps few would agree with Muriel Bradbrook that this introduction is “one of the best essays on Spenser”.⁶³ However as indications of Yeats’s processes of reading and selection even the problems and lack of clarity are fascinating. The accumulations of diverse approaches and ideas of time which allow Yeats to try out assessments of a poet’s era and heritage while never allowing himself to be restricted to a single position, never forced to accept a single line of inheritance, are the very qualities which make the introduction bizarre, disjointed and unreliable. If we feel that the real problem which Spenser has as a poet in Yeats’s account is his inability to escape from the restrictions which Yeats has placed on him, it is because Yeats uses this essay to try out so many of what were for him relatively new modes of appointing poetic ancestors. This mode of development can be seen to continue beyond the presence of echoes, allusions, borrowings and homages, to the inclusion of previous writers, notably Swift and Blake, as characters and personifications of stances in the later poetry. At the beginning of the century, though, Yeats seems to have needed to divide and complicate before he could simplify. The associations which Yeats attaches to Spenser in this introduction are available for refinement: they persist in his later adaptations and citations of Spenser. In the uses and adaptation of those associations, Yeats fashions confrontations with the possibility of traditions, literary or social, continuing at all. Adaptations of Spenser test out the realisation and perpetuation of values through phases of time.

The introduction is antagonistic by omission, in that it devotes relatively little attention even to what Yeats sees as Spenser’s finest achievements, poems of beautiful social ritual, and has more to say about limitations. This alone would perhaps make it an unusual introduction to a selection. As I will show in the next chapter, the particular aspects of Spenser’s poetry which Yeats does seem fascinated by here are those to which he returned when adapting or citing Spenser in his later work: the stress on beauty achieved at the end of eras, transhistorical, symbolic poetic vision, the poetic perception of cosmic change, and the detachment in the beauty of Spenser’s gardens.

⁶³ *The Collected Papers of Muriel Bradbrook Vol II: Aspects of Dramatic Form in the English and Irish Renaissance* (Brighton:Harvester,1983), “Yeats and the Elizabethans”, p.131.

The selection itself demands attention, particularly where the editing pointedly leaves out authorial commentary or the links between episodes and the greater structures of Spenser's poems. The selection is ordered by theme: "Happy and Unhappy Love", "Courtiers and Great Men", "Emblems and Qualities", "Gardens of Delight" and "Fauns and Satyres and Shepherds". This arrangement responds to the assertion that Spenser "seemed always to feel through the eyes, imagining everything in pictures" (p.xlvi; p.383), assembling a picture-gallery version of the best of Spenser. Narrative is necessarily interrupted, in a rather different way than it is diverted and suspended in *The Faerie Queene*. Yeats's selection concentrates on the process of combining values and symbols in poetry, but his editing allows only a version of Spenser's valuations to be recognised. There are some quite short excerpts. Other selected Spensers of the period tend to give cantos of *The Faerie Queene* and whole shorter poems. Yeats cuts selections adrift of their context, avoiding passages which refer to wider structural motifs and preoccupations, and to the major narratives.

The first grouping, "Happy and Unhappy Love" opens with the whole of *An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie*: the beginning of the selection presents Spenser immediately as a visionary poet synthesising orders of symbolism. It continues with a very short excerpt, three stanzas, from *The Teares of the Muses* (ll.385-402) entitled by Yeats "The Muse Complains of the Poets that Sing of Light Love". Yeats's Spenser moves from heavenly beauty into love in life as ordered and celebrated by poets. In this juxtaposition, the visionary poet is also the arbiter of social and sexual relations, but his authority as arbiter and the power of poetic mythologies are threatened and perhaps destroyed in a degraded era. The excerpt ends with the mourned collapse of the kingdom of "Cytheree" and of true love poetry: "And thy gay Sonne, that wingéd God of Love, / May now go prune his plumes like ruffled Dove." Here Yeats places Spenser's "Anacreontics", the group of poems which lay between the *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion* in the original 1595 publication and which are usually printed in that position, and which he calls "Poems in Honour of Cupid". in this ceremonious part of the selection Yeats creates new connections between poems. The light-hearted erotic mythology of the "Anacreontics" does contrast with the pessimistic use of the same mythology in *The Teares of the Muses*, but no more than these poems contrast with the end of the

Amoretti in their first publication. Yeats then retains the original progression and gives the whole of *Epithalamion*. This group, then, seems to encapsulate his reading of Spenser as a Master of ceremonies and memorialist of a union of artistic and social values.

Still within the “Happy and Unhappy Love” section, though, Yeats moves on to passages of *The Faerie Queene*. He begins with the episode which he had recalled in his early criticism, the encounter of Duessa and the Red Cross Knight with Fraudubio as a tree, entitled here “Enchanted Trees” (*FQ* I.ii.st.28-45). The manner of selection is typical of Yeats’s other selections from *The Faerie Queene*: he takes up the narrative in a passage which contains no direct reference to what has preceded it or to the wider structures and extended narratives and so produces what is as far as possible a single intact episode. Though Yeats includes some of Spenser’s introductory and concluding narrator’s asides, he leaves out other moral and connective comment. Here he begins with “Long time they thus together travelled,” and so does not include the preceding fight with Sansfoy. In this edition, Duessa becomes a kind of folkloric dissembling enchantress, seductive and dangerous, but not clearly fitted into any defined wider moral or religious structure. The first stanza mentions shepherds’ fear of a magical place: Yeats may have been drawn to the passage because the motifs of enchantress and physical transformation had clearly interested him in his early poetic career. This is certainly Spenser as repository of symbols and motifs. Yeats closes the episode with Duessa’s feigned faint, and the exit of the two principals. It is followed by “The Sad Story of Florimell and Marinell” (III.iv.st.7-43; III.viii.st.30-42; IV.xi.st.1-9, 52,53; IV.xii.st.1-35). As those references indicate, Yeats again takes the story out of its broader setting. The first episode describes Britomart’s defeat of Marinell, and then moves into the mythological excess of the description of Marinell’s previous life and genealogy, Proteus’s misleading prophecy concerning him and his mother’s mourning. Yeats seems to be drawn to fantastical, unbounded imaginative display here. Leaving Spenser’s narrative where it returns to Britomart, Yeats takes it up again at Proteus’s appearance and imprisonment of Florimell, stopping before Spenser’s return to Satyrane and Paridell. He then moves on to the reappearance of Florimell and Marinell, with the healing of Marinell and the introduction to the wedding of Thames and Medway at Proteus’s Hall. The inclusion of the first

stanzas of the twelfth canto strand Spenser's rhetorical preparation for the mythological spectacle (IV.xi.st.9) by leaving out the spectacle: excess and extremity in description are announced but not included. The wedding was perhaps a procession which did not meet Yeats's symbolist criteria. The selection moves to the last two stanzas of the eleventh canto, and all of the twelfth, with an epigraph summarising the remaining action and adding that the "book tells us no more than that they lived happily thereafter."

The next section "Courtiers and Great Men" is comprised of four short selections, presenting exemplary passages which offer poetic formulations of social values, and emphasising the relation between social values and poetry. The first, "Good and Bad Courtiers" (*Mother Hubberds Tale*, ll.717-844), picks out one contrast between the good and bad examples of the poem: it contains eighty-six lines on the good courtier, followed by fifty-one on the Ape and his abuse of courtesy. This passage presents fine poetry as the good courtier's ultimate activity, and as the inspiration for the rest of his behaviour, and contrasts it with degenerate, lewd and abusive verse which displays a lack of religious sense or decorum. The tribute to the Earl of Leicester follows, which forms an intact six stanza lament in *The Ruines of Time* (ll.183-224), and is one of Spenser's most pessimistic meditations on the possibility of values persisting, and persisting in language, closing in the relegation of poetic valuations to transient things: "Ne anie Poet seeks him to revive; / Yet manie Poets honourd him alive." This pessimism is continued in the following two selections "The Muse Laments there are no Great Men to sing of" and "The Muse Laments there are no more Great Poets" (*The Teares of the Muses*, ll.434-463; ll.559-570). The former passage (spoken by Calliope, the Muse of Epic, in Spenser's poem) despairs that men do not care about inspiring poetry which could have made them immortal. However, Yeats cuts off Calliope before she declares that she will rend her "golden Clarion", closing the passage with her claims for the power of her "golden Trompet of eternitie, / That lowly thoughts lift up to heavens hight," and so defiantly stressing the pseudo-religious and apocalyptic power of poetry in spite of the degenerate age in which it finds itself. The second passage, though, moves on to the decline of poetry, and the selection of just two stanzas becomes a past/present opposition of the fall of poetry from its specifically religious and oracular status, to be prophaned by "the base

vulgar". This simplified interaction of social and literary values as analogous and mutually reliant imaginative practices helps to refine Spenser into something like that "last king of the old race" foreseeing historical decay, as Yeats described him in the introduction, in another version of the original divergence of language and value (p.xxxvii; p.376).

The third section, "Emblems and Qualities" seems to aim to demonstrate Spenser's capacity to sustain visionary environments rather than his creation of emblems to present values. The section begins with "The House of Despair" (*FQ* I.ix.st.21-54), and follows it with "The House of Richesse" (*FQ* II.vii.st.3-66), both cut into independent episodes, the latter including a whole infernal series of types and mythological figures. Yeats's selection of the House of Despair recalls his own poetic formulations of seductive escape from life and accords with his readings of Spenser's islands and their "unrepining peace." "The House of Love" (*FQ* III.xi.st.21-30, 47-55; xii.st.1-45) also includes the introduction to a mythological picture-gallery, but actually cuts out the loves of the Olympians (III.xi.st.31-46) to move straight to the statue and the theatrical presentation of the masque of Cupid.

Skipping the first two proverbial and generalised stanzas of Scudamour's narrative, Yeats moves straight on to "The House of Friendship" (*FQ* IV.x.st.3-58), which is actually Scudamour's rape of Amoret from the Temple of Venus. The canto is allegorical throughout, but this does not seem to have deterred the editor: again, he presumably allowed it to be sufficiently visionary, symbolic and powerful to escape the limitations of allegory, and recognised its poetic achievement of ceremony and harmony from discordant and profusely generative images. The episode also concludes the Scudamour and Amoret story of "The House of Love", by telling its beginning.

The last two selections in this section continue to suggest that Yeats's greatest interest in "Emblems and Qualities" is in poetic visions of symbolic order and of change: they are the "Mutabilitie Cantos" and "The Wandering of the Stars", the introduction to Book V. The "Mutabilitie Cantos" are given in full, and form the longest unbroken selection from Spenser, although Yeats does not include the return to Christian orthodoxy of the two stanzas of canto viii. "The Wandering of the Stars" (*FQ* V. Introduction. st.1-11) continues from the debate between order and revolt to describe a fall from a "golden age" to a "stonie one", an inversion of

values, and links poetic vision to that of “Aegyptian wisards old”. It concludes with an appeal to Justice and with the introduction of Artegall: for Yeats, this would have been a different fall, into mistaken values.

“Gardens of Delight” is the fourth section. The first selection in it combines “The Islands of Phaedria and Acrasia” (*FQ* II.v.st.28-34; II.vi.st.2-26; II.xii.st.1-87). Starting at stanza 28, Yeats misses the strict moralistic comment which precedes that. The implications of the scene remain, but Yeats’s selection concentrates on sensual drowsiness and beauty, stopping at stanza 34 where Atin and action interrupt. The second excerpt similarly misses the initial commentary, and breaks before Guyon and Cymochles fight. Yeats has collected these poetic regions before giving the whole of the last stanza of Book II and the destruction of the Bower of Bliss. Bornstein and Turpin both record a marginal note in Yeats’s own copy of Spenser’s complete works, at II.vi.st.14 during Phaedria’s seduction of Cymochles, which reads “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”. As Bornstein suggests, the pattern of seduction from a Romantic quest by an enchantress probably replaced Spenser’s Christian allegory in Yeats’s mind.⁶⁴

The other garden is of course “The Garden of Adonis” (*FQ* III.vi.st.30-48). This fairly brief excerpt cuts straight to the garden and its great containment of generation and form, and the measured acknowledgement of the “Great enemy” Time, concluding with the imprisonment of Adonis’s enemy, the boar. Yeats’s selection does not proceed to the accretion of classical mythologies or the return to the major narrative in stanzas 49-50. The garden remains isolated as a great, still, vision of a system containing movement and persistence.⁶⁵

The last section concerns “Faunes and Satyres and Shepherds”. It begins with the untroubled “Praise of the Shepherd’s Life” (“Virgils Gnat” II.113-52), including the congruence of pastoral joys with poetry, and proceeds to “Una among the Fauns and Satyres” (*FQ* I.vi.st.7-31), including the passage which Yeats had referred to in that early review. It begins after Una’s capture by Sansloy, with

⁶⁴ Bornstein, p.26; Turpin, p.48. Both also record the comment “Shelley’s boats” beside Phaedria’s “shallow ship” (*FQ* II.vi.st.5): p.25, p.47.

⁶⁵ The marginal notes to this passage are fascinating. Beside st.32, Yeats wrote, probably with some satisfaction, “Spenser’s pagan cosmogeny - venusian genius governs all life.” Beside st.33 lines 3-9, the stanza which he later quoted in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, he noted “Metempsychosis”, and beside st.35 lines 1-8 “all forms (or form) is in the garden of [astrological sign for Venus]” and

Providence providing her with rescuers. The portrayal of the mythological figures and the birth and life of Satyrane is rich in fantastical description and the imaginative richness of magical places. The selection ends with Satyrane's learning Una's "discipline of faith and verity": for Yeats, this may be a type of the union of original mythological excess with sophisticated discipline, in poetry and in national cultures. The last pieces are four months from *The Shepheardes Calender*: "Februarie", "October", "November" and "December". In spite of Yeats's disapproval of Spenser for failing to unite pastoral with Ireland, he was evidently still impressed by Spenser's pastoral poetry, and these pieces touch on some perceptions and rituals which Yeats would continue to find significant to the writing of his own poetry: the contrast of youth and age including a fable about another tree with mysterious associations, the aims of poetic ambition and its place in the world, pastoral elegy, and the poetic perception of cycles of perpetual change.

So in the selection as a whole Yeats does generally reinforce the pronouncements of his introduction, by choosing towards Spenser's achievements as poet of beautiful social ritual and elegist for a passing phase of imaginative richness in poetry and in society. However, he also includes episodes of elaborate fantasy, of the mythologisation of place, the earth's "sheltering sacredness" (p.xxv; p.365), which he described as modes of imaginative creativity typical of that passing era. Yeats had asserted that Spenser "was always to love the journey more than its end," and he picked out sections and regions to leave little sense of the progress of Spenser's allegorical journeys. Turpin suggests that Yeats's attraction to Spenser's trees and woods may have been heightened by the fact "that he was staying at Coole Park whilst reading Collier's edition", and shows parallels between the poem "In the Seven Woods" and Arthur's introduction to his vision of the Queene of the Faeries (*FQ* I.ix.st.12).⁶⁶ The vision of a faery woman would have resonated with Yeats's uses of the same motif, but clearly he associated Spenser with some Irish places even though he made much of Spenser's failure to respond to Ireland.

connected by an arrow to the foot of the page "does not Spenser in one of the minor poems equate form and soul". Payne Collier II, pp.455-7.

⁶⁶ Turpin, p.34, p.39-40.

According to the introduction Yeats found these selected excerpts to be generally unaffected by the new political pressures of Spenser's time, but even as such they represent an era, and a mode of poetry, coming to beauty before passing away, or creating beauty from perceptions of loss. The selection announces that it is saving these parts of Spenser from the encroachment of history and from the errors of Spenser's own interpretative structures, and it excludes action. Like the introduction, it offers only an ambivalent valuation of Spenser as poetic visionary: his creation of symbolic visionary regions is given attention, as are his visions of cosmic natural and supernatural systems, but his cosmic moral, religious, historical and mythic-historical structures are left out almost entirely. Perhaps most telling in terms of Yeats's later uses of Spenser is his preoccupation with the achievement of stability within depictions of movement and change. Yeats generally excises Spenser's own broader constructions of national, social and historical stability, but remains fascinated by the more local poetic examples of contrast between flux and stasis.

In terms of Yeats's career the selection makes some new formulations. His interest in Spenser's regions of "dateless leisure" continues, but now he puts considerable stress on the isolation of those regions from common human concerns and from history, an isolation which later comes to be seen as more dangerous in his aesthetic terms. The "Good and Bad Courtiers" selection also marks a new stage in the interaction between poetic and aristocratic valuations in Yeats's work, and prepares for specifically rather than generally elegiac poetry. In the next chapter I will look at Yeats's adaptations and citations of Spenser in his later writings. In *Ideas of Good and Evil* and in *Poems of Spenser* Yeats interwove selective formulations of historical context, poetry, nationhood and aspects of places to set out principles determining the constituents of poetic tradition and the kind of imaginative community which he believed poetry could produce and which he believed, in its turn, could produce poetry. My readings of his later encounters with Spenser demonstrate how the techniques operating in his critical practice at the beginning of the twentieth century feed back into his later work. Place and visions of historical movement remain among the major issues in Yeats's returns to Spenser, often combined in his adaptations of Spenser's images which try out the possibility of locating lasting social and poetic values.

Chapter 4

Yeats and Spenser II

“Some moralist or mythological poet”: Yeats’s later encounters with Spenser

This chapter examines some of Yeats’s adaptations of Spenser after his selected edition. I will cite a number of Spenserian echoes noted by previous critics, and add some more. While Chapman’s and Davidson’s work on Yeats and Spenser has been useful to my study, they both underestimate Spenser’s influence and both tend to over-psychologize the relation. Spenser does appear to return from subordination to prominence as an influence after 1916, but that seems to be a function of a particular mode of linguistic richness and an elaboration of values which Yeats sought to realise or to imagine the problems of realising, and for which Spenser offered models. He also made some adaptations from Spenser’s poetry between 1903 and 1916. Transforming his own critique of Spenser, in his later adaptations Yeats often associated Spenser with historical division. In a few poems, notably “A Prayer for my Daughter”, Spenser seems to have contributed more and less specific details to portrayals of potentially attainable ideal social milieux, but in most of the cases in which Yeats turned to Spenser in his mature poetry it was for recognitions of the loss of such conditions. These conditions also have their counterpart in poetic standards, which also tend to be lost or threatened: Spenser became a model for Yeats’s presentations of poetic creation in extremity, or in phases of diminished imaginative capacity. There are exceptions: Yeats cited Spenser’s description of the *anima mundi*. However, that is in a quotation. In adaptations and in one adaptation followed by a direct reference, Yeats reordered Spenser’s images and words to recast dissociations and declines: he altered his sources in Spenser to examine the possible continuation or the failure of social and poetic traditions. These adaptations tend to produce images which are more stylized, more carefully posed, than their originals, forming isolated and crucial symbols of symbolist and mythopoeic capacity.

The influence of Spenser on Yeats’s mature poetry goes beyond particular and detectable verbal adaptations. In some cases it does not seem possible definitively to identify adaptations, while it does seem reasonable to suggest influence. The mutability of the first stanza of “Sailing to Byzantium” may

be partially Spenserian in inspiration, as may the artifice set against it. More generally, Spenser is an influence on Yeats's growing confidence in elaboration in his mature poetry, no more so than when it is an elaboration of poetic values set defiantly against decay. I do not suggest that Yeats had a "fixed" idea of Spenser after his introduction, but rather that a process of association tended to be at work in his adaptations. In effect, crucial passages of Spenser seem to have stood out in relief for Yeats, set out against the declines which Spenser deplored, but also against the forces of historical change among which Yeats had chosen to place his model. Some motifs also change their value: there are fewer islands in Yeats's mature poetry, and he came to use Spenser's islands as representative of a dangerous self-enclosure within the poetic imagination. In accordance with a general development in Yeats's imagery and his concepts of tradition, he shows less interest in the folkloric aspect of Spenser. Spenser comes to provide him with emblems and applications of mythology rather than with "Enchanted Trees" or enchantresses.

Some traces of Yeats's work on Spenser appear in his drama. Mary Turpin notes that Yeats underlined Spenser's description of the unicorn's "precious horne" in *FQ* II.v.st.10, and that the unicorn "begins to emerge as a symbol in Yeats's writing in 1902", in particular in *On Baile's Strand*.¹ Katherine Worth suggests that Spenser's Blatant Beast is a source for Paul's beast in Act II of *Where There is Nothing*. In Act IV Paul recalls being assaulted in a vision by beasts, prior to the appearance of angels on unicorns, but as Worth shows, Paul's beast in Act II is a "potential ally", Laughter.² Yeats may have drawn on Spenser for all of these figures. The Blatant Beast attacks the clergy among others and is finally found in a monastery, and a monastery is the setting for Paul's rebellious sermon. Given Yeats's valuations of Spenser's grace and courtesy elsewhere, it is perhaps indicative of his enthusiasm for heterodoxy and of the depth of his revulsion from

¹ Turpin, p.28, *FQ* p.209. References to Spenser are to *The Faerie Queene* ed. by A. C. Hamilton (London and New York: Longman, 1977, corrected 1980); and to *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser* ed. by William A. Oram, Einar Bjorvand, Ronald Bond, Thomas H. Cain, Alexander Dunlop and Richard Schell (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989).

² Katharine Worth, ed., *Where There is Nothing by W. B. Yeats and The Unicorn from the Stars By W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987), p.17. *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats* ed. by Russell K. Alspach (London: Macmillan, 1966), p.1099: "My

Spenser's Irish politics that he should adapt the Blatant Beast which assaulted Artegall/Lord Gray into a positive, though disruptive, force.³ Paul's aggressively revisionist sermon to his heterodox acolytes further develops some of the concepts of "eternity" from *Ideas of Good and Evil*, but also dramatises something of the isolation of heterodoxy: it is perhaps Yeats's most extreme dramatisation of the heterodox quest.⁴

Chapman rightly identifies *The King's Threshold* as a dramatisation of a traditional trope of troubled tradition:

The play, virtually equivalent to the apologies of Sidney and Shelley, shows very clearly that Yeats's poetic conservatism begins in sympathy with one of poetry's oldest, most universal and enduring traditions: the myth of the poet's ejection from a once-unified prelapsarian society, symbolically his tragic alienation from his audience.⁵

As I have suggested, by this point in his career Yeats was doing something more than repeating this tradition. He was complicating and reinventing it into a critical practice, a practice which he applied to Spenser with particular sophistication. Seanchan does develop from some concepts which are also evident in the Spenser introduction, and the link in his speeches between standards of poetry and other forms of human, including physical, inheritance draws on similar themes in "The Teares of the Muses". The connection persisted into Yeats's last poems. However, Seanchan's aggressive determination make him a contrast to Yeats's Spenser. If anything, Seanchan protests where Yeats felt Spenser had been too weak either to disdain or to take on politics and politicians. Spenser may have helped to inspire a new assertiveness in Yeats's claims for a poet's role, but if so it was partially in reaction.

Daniel Harris includes Spenser among Yeats's influences in Yeats's synthesis of Renaissance values and application of them to Coole, and notes a more specific detail in Yeats's synthesis:

wild beast is Laughter, the mightiest of the enemies of God. I will outrun it and make it friendly."
The unicorns and the visionary persecuting beasts occur at pp.1131-2.

³ *FQ* V.xii. st.37-42, p.619.

⁴ Familiar phrases recur. "The Christian's business is not reformation, but revelation, and the only labours he can put his hand to can never be accomplished in Time. [...] We must get rid of everything that is not measureless eternal life." *V Plays* p.1139. "He [Paul] says that if a man can only keep his mind on the one high thought he gets out of time into eternity, and learns the truth for itself." p.1127.

⁵ Chapman, pp.3-4.

“A Friend’s Illness” (1909), joining Spenserian personification with tensed metaphysical conceit, plays the double theme of personal revelation and cosmic judgment: mere apocalypse cannot match the internal, refining fire which exalts Lady Gregory’s soul into a type of the indestructible *anima mundi*.⁶

However, while I recognise that Spenser remained an influence on Yeats’s treatments of Coole, and I will note further examples, it seems that definite echoes and verbal adaptations of Spenser are more frequent in Yeats’s later country-house poetry, where they contribute to a linguistic richness portraying cultural abundance in more lavish terms than are used in those “pre-elegies” before 1916, and in the poems on *The Playboy of the Western World* and on the Lane pictures controversy. Although Spenser was perhaps the first and the last principal poetic influence on Yeats’s visions of aristocracy and art joined but isolated against decline, those poems owe more to Ben Jonson in tone. Images of the eagle, and of the eagle’s eye, do occur in Spenser, but they also occur in Castiglione: Yeats’s Renaissances continued to develop as syntheses of sources. Yeats’s apparent reaction against Spenser before Book VI of *The Faerie Queene* may account for the lack of more specific adaptations of Spenser in Yeats’s own versions of Courtesy (although this reaction did not extend to the Mutabilitie Cantos).

For Yeats, Spenser remained connected to contrasts between imaginative eras, whether as victim or observer. In “No Second Troy” Yeats turned to Spenser for a description of social disturbance which is also a parallel description of imaginative loss, and the poem suggests the presence of Mutabilitie within the association of Maud Gonne with Helen of Troy. In *The Faerie Queene*, Jove describes to the other gods Mutabilitie’s origins and her rebellion:

Of that bad seed is this bold woman bred,
That now with bold presumption doth aspire
To thrust faire *Phoebe* from her siluer bed,
And eke our selues from heaven’s high Empire,
If that her might were match to her desire:⁷

Yeats’s adaptation of this poetic construction of destructive desire attributes the lack to an audience rather than to the revolutionary female herself. Maud Gonne does not produce the same results as Helen, not because she lacks any power to inspire, but because of the general modern lack of a capacity for grand destructive

⁶ Daniel A. Harris, *Yeats, Coole Park and Ballylee* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), pp.51-86, p.53.

action. In effect, Yeats's adaptation of Spenser marks her belatedness by adapting the attribution of the limitations on action:

Why should I blame her that she filled my days
With misery, or that she would of late
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
Had they but courage equal to desire? (p.256)

In *Ideas of Good and Evil*, Yeats quoted Shelley's formulation in *Julian and Maddalo* of a revolutionary desire and its limitations:

Where is the beauty, love and truth we seek
But in our minds? And if we were not weak,
Should we be less in deed than in desire?
(IGE p.99; first line corrected E&I p.70)

In this succession, Yeats's adaptation of Spenser may also involve reversing Shelley's reversal, to cast aspiration into a threatening light in accordance with Spenser, and to characterise its failure as a condition of contemporary history. Spenser introduced a new mythological personage, though he described her as one of the pre-Olympian titans, into his adaptation of Olympian myth in order to explicate her rebellion and defeat. Yeats apparently adapts this adaptation in a further extension of diminished and belated imaginative appeal: the adaptation adds another, submerged, connotation to his depiction of Maud Gonne as displaced Homeric figure, and measures history by the conditions and necessities of poetic adaptation both from Homer and from Spenser. Adaptation is confirmed as repetition, not just of one precursor but in a repetitious pattern. Mutabilitie's rebellion in Spenser is symbolic of all rebellions against order, rebellions which are shown to be contained within an ultimate order. For Yeats, the order which contains Maud Gonne is the history of imaginative conditions, and is defined through adaptation of the perceptions of such conditions which Yeats finds and continues in poetry. Her failure is in fact the failure of a symbolic figure to find a correspondence in an audience in an era of diminished response. The "successful" poetic adaptation realises a failure of persistence in the communal imagination.

In *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* Yeats returns to Spenser for a precedent in affirming, and so also perhaps proving the existence of, the anima mundi. The image of Spenser's which Yeats chooses to represent the anima mundi is itself a proof of a common source of images:

⁷ *FQ*, VII.vi.st.21, p.717.

I am persuaded that a logical process, or a series of related images, has body and period, and I think of Anima Mundi as a great pool or garden where it moves through its allotted growth like a great water-plant or fragrantly branches in the air. Indeed as Spenser's Garden of Adonis:-

There is the first seminary
Of all things that are born to live and die
According to their kynds.

The soul by changes of 'vital congruity,' More says, draws to it a certain thought, and this thought draws by its association the sequence of many thoughts, endowing them with a life in the vehicle meted out according to the intensity of the first perception.⁸

Ten pages later, Yeats returns to the garden for Spenser's elucidation of cyclical re-birth, and quotes stanza 33 in the garden of Adonis episode. Here Spenser is a poetic authority supporting Yeats's chosen philosophical authority. Doctrine ultimately relies on poetry, and Yeats repeats Spenser's elucidation of repetition to present his own philosophy of the repetition of souls and of images.

A friend once dreamed that she saw many dragons climbing upon
the steep side of a cliff and continually falling. Henry More thought
that those who, after centuries of life, failed to find the rhythmic life
and to pass into the condition of fire, were born again. Edmund
Spenser, who was among More's masters, affirmed that nativity
without giving it cause:-

After they agayne retourned beene,
They in that garden planted be agayne,
And grow afresh, as they had never seene
Fleshly corruption, nor mortal payne.
Some thousand years so doen they ther remayne,
And then of him are clad with other hew,
Or sent into the chaungeful world agayne,
Till thither they retourn where first they grew:
So, like a wheele, around they ronne from old to new.⁹

Yeats finds a perception of perpetual cycles in Spenser, but for him this poetic perception is of poetic images as much as of souls.

Yeats's return to Spenser for his first elegy on Robert Gregory is well documented. On finishing the poem he acknowledged in a letter to Lady Gregory that "what Virgil wrote for some friend of his and [...] what Spenser wrote of Sidney" were his principal models for "Shepherd and Goatherd".¹⁰ As Chapman notes, Spenser's poem unlike Virgil's fifth eclogue, is not a dialogue, and so

⁸ *Mythologies*, p.352-3; *FQ* III.vi.st.30, p.360.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.363; *FQ* III.vi.st.33, p.361.

¹⁰ *The Collected Letters of W B Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade, (London: Hart-Davis, 1954), pp.647-8.

“formally at variance with Yeats’s poem”¹¹. However, other elements of “Shepherd and Goatherd” draw attention to Spenser’s other versions of pastoral: the youth/age divide recalls that of the “Februarie” eclogue, the hills/lowland contrast that of “June” and “Julye” (in “Julye” the exchange is also specifically between a shepherd and a goatherd), in “November” Thenot asks “Colin” for an elegy, and “Astrophel” itself is followed by another voice in “The Doleful Lay of Clorinda”: Yeats may have compiled structural motifs from a wider reading of Spenser.¹² “Shepherd and Goatherd” certainly aims to realise the location of Virgilian pastoral in Ireland which, according to Yeats’s introduction, Spenser had failed to achieve. However, the relative failure of the poem may be a result of its repetition of the faults of Yeats’s earliest Spenserian poems.

Spenser’s “Astrophel” makes particular mention of the death abroad, and as Patrick Keane notes, this same issue brings Gregory back to haunt in “Reprisals”.¹³ Davidson notes the parallels between the catalogues of the qualities of the dead in “Astrophel” and in Yeats’s poem, and seems right in seeing Yeats’s depiction of Lady Gregory’s stoicism as a replacement of and a reaction against Spenser’s description of Stella’s expressive and excessive grief.¹⁴ Chapman examines the drafts of Yeats’s poem to demonstrate the explication there of Yeats’s adaptation of Thomas Taylor’s neoplatonic doctrine of the soul’s passage back to youth, an explication which is abbreviated in the finished poem.¹⁵ However, the supernatural doctrine of the Goatherd’s song is not a direct borrowing from any analogous use of a doctrine in Spenser. There is perhaps a parallel to it in the cyclical cleansing in the Garden of Adonis, in a stanza (III.iii.st.33) which Yeats quoted in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, but this elegy does not echo that directly.¹⁶ Perhaps the surprising quality of “Shepherd and Goatherd” is the lack of any attempt to subject the primitive, pastoral setting to any strong

¹¹ Chapman, p.133.

¹² “The Doleful Lay of Clorinda” is attributed to Mary Sidney, but may, in full or in part, be Spenser’s work: *SPES*, p.563-8.

¹³ *SPES*, p.573; Keane, p.226. Keane also detects (p.253n) a possible reminiscence of the “Mutabilitie Cantos” (vii.st.21-22, pp.727-8) in “Reprisals”, where the air, ‘a “thin spirit”, is felt to ‘flit still’. The cluster which Keane identifies here may be confirmed by the address to a “thin Shade” and by the gulls which “flit about” in that precursor to “Reprisals”, “To a Shade”.

¹⁴ Davidson, p.138-9, p.146.

¹⁵ Chapman, pp.132-7. F.A.C. Wilson identified the source in Taylor in *W.B. Yeats and Tradition* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), p.201.

¹⁶ *Mythologies*, p.363.

sense of a fracture resulting from the death: the elegies spoken by the Shepherd and Goatherd within the elegy neither naturalise nor supernaturalise the death to much effect. Yeats actually fails here to turn Gregory's death into the kind of symbolic loss which he had recognised in Spenser's elegies for men.

Yeats returned to Spenser in "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory", but in a compressed recollection of Spenser's celebration of Sidney rather than in specific detail of mode, form or image. Among the many poetic sources adapted into that elegy, Spenser is the significant precursor for that subtle assertion of the poet's authority to judge the value of the dead:

Our Sidney and our perfect man. (p.325)

The overt identification, contained and limited by "Our", tends to direct attention to the community and to the poet. In accord with this poem's greater emphasis on the strains of using elegy to turn loss into a celebration of continuation and creation, the naming here points the reader to Yeats as repetition of Spenser, as much as it does to Gregory as repetition of Sidney.

This elegy also contains more submerged adaptations of Spenser's valuations, adaptations which Yeats returned to elsewhere. The phrase which Yeats uses for the potential lost in Gregory, a "world's delight" is also Spenserian. As Harris notes, it occurs in "The Doleful Lay of Clorinda" (l.49): "Death the devourer of all worlds delight," and this may have initially attracted Yeats to the elegiac possibilities of the phrase. However, it also occurs four other times in Spenser's work.¹⁷ One of those instances seems particularly relevant here, given the occurrences of "heart" and "speech" in "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory":

What worlds delight or joy of living speach
Can heart, so plung'd in sea of sorrowes deepe,
And heaped with so huge misfortunes, reach?¹⁸

"Delight" also features in "An Irish Airman foresees his Death", and is a major value for both Yeats and Spenser, frequently repeated in both of their oeuvres. In Urania's speech in "The Teares of the Muses" it becomes a specifically

¹⁷ Harris, p.135n, "The Doleful Lay of Clorinda" *SPES* p.579. The presence of the phrase in "The Doleful Lay of Clorinda" may be another possible indication of Spenser's authorship, or share in authorship, given its presence elsewhere in his work. The other instances are *FQ* V.xi.st.62.5 p.612; "In Honour of Beautie", l.16, p.706; "Commendatory Sonnets" iv, l.10, p.776.

¹⁸ *FQ* I.vii.st.39.1-3, p.104.

self-generated value, and this feeds into Yeats's syntheses of aristocratic, individual richness of life:

How ever yet they mee despise and spight,
I feede on sweet contentment of my thought,
And pleas my selfe with mine owne selfe-delight,
In contemplation of things heavenlie wrought:
So loathing earth, I looke up to the sky,
And being driven hence I thether fly. (ll.523-528)¹⁹

In "A Prayer for my Daughter" (l.67), the soul "learns at last that it is self-delighting" (p.405): the ideal escape from subordination to external pressures is a development of Yeats's idea of Spenser's best work. The value reappears in "Meditations in Time of Civil War", where "life's own self-delight" in "Ancestral Houses" is opposed by the destruction of "self-delighting reverie" in "I see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness" (p.417, p.427 l.29).

Spenser may have been an influence on Yeats's development of elegiac and satiric valuations of eras in *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* and in *Responsibilities*, but if so, the adaptation seems to have been generalised rather than a matter of specific verbal details. Spenser's notions of courtesy derive in part from Castiglione, and so they have affinities with strains of thought which Yeats was developing through this period. However, Spenser's influence becomes much more clear after 1916. It seems that Spenser provided a model for depicting and locating the ideals of lived aristocratic values. Though still elegised more than celebrated in the present or projected into the future, these socio-poetic valuations are more elaborately realised than any standard whose loss is mourned in those earlier volumes. "A Prayer for my Daughter" is exceptional in that it celebrates a future mode of life in contrast to previous losses, and though it establishes its ideals by contrasts, they remain relatively unthreatened. In accord with his celebration of Spenser's ceremonious talents, Yeats seems to make use of Spenser through much of this poem, but his adaptations for once lack the same emphasis on fracture and decline, though they do suggest the possibility that hopes may fail. The extent of Yeats's adaptation in the mature poetry varies from the careful

¹⁹ p.288. The fourth line of this stanza may also be recalled in "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" (l.45): "In contemplation had those three so wrought / Upon a moment." It is very difficult to be definitive in these cases. This example conforms to the rearrangement of clusters of words in clearer cases of adaptation.

rearrangement of an image and the associated words of a passage of Spenser, to the slight and probably unconscious single verbal echo in a passage of Yeats's poetry which reprises the subject of a passage in Spenser.²⁰ The derivation of "Plenty's horn" and "the rich horn" in "A Prayer for my Daughter" from Spenser is made more clear by the relevant context in *The Faerie Queene*, where the image also occurs in a description of the nurturing of ideal female qualities:

But to this faire Belphoebe in her birth
The heavens so favourable were and free,
Looking with myld aspect upon the earth,
In th'Horoscope of her nativitee,
That all the gifts of grace and chastitee,
On her they poured forth of plenteous horne (III.vi.st.2.1-6)²¹

Yeats's readings and citations also involved Spenser in other versions of tradition and questionings of the continuation of traditions. The process of division which Yeats employs upon history and upon the history of imaginative creation in the Spenser introduction, is employed to illustrate an account of Yeats's own contemporaries in *The Trembling of the Veil*. Here Spenser becomes an important, though initially stranded, example of a condition which has recurred in the late nineteenth century. Any strict notion of this as cyclical history is rather unclear and irrelevant, but the divisions Yeats saw in Spenser and in his work, products of era and personality, illustrate a concern with isolation, a concern which is the product of Yeats's reflections on his own early work. This passage is a culminating one in the course of Yeats's successive accounts of the lives and deaths of his contemporaries in the London of the 1890s. While recasting their condition into another literary history, he links it to an adaptation of some of his earlier views of Spenser. The passage stabilises Yeats's ambivalence towards Spenser, to preserve him in a literary history which comprehends tragic irony. Yeats separates selections of Spenser here to claim that they were already separated, and to withdraw from making judgments upon them, even as he saw them in his introduction as being free from the moral judgment afflicting much of

²⁰ Yeats's hopes for his daughter's rejection of opinion may be a transmutation of Spenser also: the decline of Maud Gonne into "an old bellows full of angry wind" may recall "Colin Cloute's Come Home Againe" (ll.715-717, *SPES* p.553):

For highest lookes have not the highest mynd,
Nor haughtie words most full of highest thoughts:
But are like bladders blowen up with wynd

²¹ *FQ*, p.355.

Spenser's poetry, and seeing them as examples of an immanent repeated and individually tragic pattern. Yeats also quotes and refers to Spenser only after quoting himself: this is a literary history within an autobiography, and sustained by self-reference and by his own successive readings of Spenser:

Though I cannot explain what brought others of my generation to such misfortune, I think that (falling back on my parable of the moon) I can explain some part of Dowson's and Johnson's dissipation:-

What portion in the world can the artist have

Who has awakened from the common dream

But dissipation and despair?

When Edmund Spenser described the islands of Phaedria and of Acrasia he aroused the indignation of Lord Burleigh, that 'rugged forehead', and Lord Burleigh was in the right if morality were our only object.²²

The progress through exceptions is syntactically tortuous, and moves towards a definition of a movement which seems paradoxically to include only exceptions and isolated figures.

In those islands certain qualities of beauty, certain forms of sensuous loveliness were separated from all the general purposes of life, as they had not been hitherto in European literature - and would not be again, for even the historical process has its ebb and flow, till Keats wrote his *Endymion*. I think that the movement of our thought has more and more so separated certain images and regions of the mind, and that these images grow in beauty as they grow in sterility. Shakespeare leaned, as it were, even as craftsman, upon the general fate of men and nations, had about him the excitement of the playhouse; and all poets, including Spenser in all but a few pages, until our age came, and when it came almost all, have had some propaganda or traditional doctrine to give companionship with their fellows. Had not Matthew Arnold his faith in what he described as the best thought of his generation, Browning his psychological curiosity, Tennyson, as before him Shelley and Wordsworth, moral values that were not aesthetic values? But Coleridge of the *Ancient Mariner*, and *Kublai Khan*, and Rossetti in all his writings, made what Arnold has called that 'morbid effort', that search for 'perfection of thought and feeling, and to unite this to perfection of form', sought this new, pure beauty, and suffered in their lives because of it. [...] What can the Christian confessor say to those who more and more must make all out of the privacy of their thought, calling up perpetual images of desire, for he cannot say, 'Cease to be artist, cease to be poet', where the whole life is art and poetry, nor can he bid men leave the world, who suffer from the terrors that pass before shut eyes.²³

²² *Autobiographies*, pp.312-313.

²³ *Autobiographies*, pp.313-314.

The history continues, but is in fact a frustration of progress in artistic history, a hiatus in the pace of its movement. Retaining his dismissal of allegory, Yeats continues to suggest that the different gardens in Spenser are cut off from the moral scheme and are products of personal vision. But whereas he had previously rejected Spenser's obedience to the moralism of his culture and approved the exceptions in his work, Yeats now registers what he had seen as Spenser's occasional evasions of that moralism as hazardous. Vision and the pursuit of vision are both perpetually dangerous and particularly clearly dangerous in this more recent and autobiographical period. Spenser again becomes a resource for discussing relations of art and life, as Dowson and Johnson are in the reminiscences of them which run through Yeats's work. Here he puts the early model and the early contemporaries together into a complex which is both a broad literary and a personal history, depicting mistakes which he has himself avoided. In 1925 Yeats added a note to his early Rose poems which forms an analogous kind of autobiography:

I notice upon reading these poems for the first time for several years that the quality symbolized as The Rose differs from the Intellectual Beauty of Shelley and of Spenser in that I have imagined it as suffering with man and not as something pursued and seen from afar.²⁴

The retrospective distinction which Yeats makes at this point may also indicate an anxiety to exempt himself from excessive and isolating idealism.

In "The Tragic Generation", religion and moralism are firmly put down as inadequate to the reaching beyond the world evoked here, but amoral perfection offers only isolation. Apparent movement towards a union of literature and sacredness which could escape this temporal trap is frustrated. The possibility of revelation is elaborated through the same quotation which provides the title of this autobiographical work, but is denied. Again Yeats brings history and revelation of the eternal together in the definition of an aesthetic, but again the moment of revelation never enters Yeatsian history. The section of autobiography closes in with questions, and finally with another unexplained change in the controlling tides:

Why are these strange souls born everywhere today, with hearts that Christianity, as shaped by history, cannot satisfy? Our love-letters wear out our love; no school of painting outlasts its founders, every

²⁴ *VPoems* p.589.

stroke of the brush exhausts the impulse, Pre-Raphaelitism had some twenty years; Impressionism thirty perhaps. Why should we believe that religion can never bring round its antithesis? Is it true that our air is disturbed, as Mallarmé said, by ‘the trembling of the veil of the Temple’, or that ‘our whole age is seeking to bring forth a sacred book’? Some of us thought that book to be near towards the end of last century, but the tide sank again.²⁵

Spenser is here the original example and the progenitor of a movement which is ultimately antipathetic to the progression of movements, to continuing artistic history. While reflecting on the failure of his friends and examining the phases of artistic development in that period, Yeats undoubtedly implies a reflection on his own evasion of the problems which afflicted those whom he describes here. He may also be recalling the pursuit of an ideal union of literature and sacredness which is a theme in *Ideas of Good and Evil*. In adapting the comments which he had made earlier on Spenser’s islands, ambiguously retaining the amoralism but adding to it the implication of deleterious isolation, Yeats is also recalling his own use of islands, perhaps even acknowledging their ultimate derivation from Spenser, and his repeated returns from ideals of isolation and escape. The ambiguity of his attitude to the literary tradition which he delineates here is carefully posed: he arranges the aspects which he perceives as both appealing and disastrous, allowing him to stand back as both critic and as one who recognised and relinquished the appeals of an isolated personal escape from temporal pressures, to portray the frustration of development with tragic irony. The poetic regions which he had once seen as displaying Spenser’s genius in an escape from extra-literary pressures are now used to introduce an elegiac summary of an aesthetic position.

As McAlindon notes, Yeats turned to Spenser again for another elegiac measurement of the loss of imaginative potential in “The Tower”.²⁶ In this case, the loss is not a product of a change in national or broad cultural phase, nor of a crucial death, but of the apparent end of a phase in the poet’s own creativity:

It seems that I must bid the Muse go pack,
Choose Plato and Plotinus for a friend
Until imagination, ear and eye,
Can be content with argument and deal
In abstract things; (p.409)

²⁵ *Autobiographies*, p.315.

²⁶ McAlindon, p.163n.

In *The Teares of the Muses* it is Erato, the Muse of love-poetry who dismisses the mythological sanctity and power as inappropriate to a diminished era:

Fair Cytheree the Mother of delight,
And Queene of beautie, now thou maist go pack;
For lo thy Kingdome is defaced quight,
Thy scepter rent, and power put to wrack;
And thy gay sonne, that winged God of Love,
May now go prune his plumes like ruffed Dove.²⁷

The transfer of phrase, which produces the dismissal of the Muse, rather than by her, is typical of Yeats's adaptations of Spenser's images and terms relating to threats to the poetic imagination. Rearranging and modifying his source, Yeats rearranges motifs of disruption and usurpation to develop more extensive recurrences of such disturbance as motifs in his own work. Spenser announced a crisis in literary history, Yeats internalises as he adapts to announce the possibility of a crisis in his own career and perhaps, given the source and the concern with ageing, in his virility. This insistent redistribution of words, of qualities, of agency or of scope are evident through his later treatments of Spenserian images, but also make those treatments difficult to summarise, since careful redistribution of the terms of each specific source-passage seems to be essential to the extension of that motif by the poetic inheritor.

The swansong in the last section of "The Tower" has no clear verbal source in Spenser, but other occurrences of swans in Yeats's poetry do. These birds constitute some of Yeats's densest syntheses of literary and mythological sources: through the Leda myth they carry connotations of divinity, violence and the initiation of a new era; in other manifestations their song is associated with imminent death and conclusion. Giorgio Melchiori's examination of Yeats's uses of images of swans is very detailed, and acknowledges the complexity of the syntheses which form Yeats's images and the difficulty of tracing definitive relationships. I will summarise some of his points. He includes Spenser, Shelley, Gogarty, Sturge Moore, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Blake, Michelangelo, Homer, Moreau, Pater and the Theosophists, the myth of the children of Lir which was also re-told by Todhunter, Katherine Tynan and Aubrey de Vere, as well as

²⁷ *The Teares of the Muses* ll.397-402, SPES p.284.

Yeats's actual experiences at Coole.²⁸ I will concentrate on a few aspects of Yeats's uses of swans, of flight, and of their sources in Spenser, because these instances demonstrate a concentrated attention to adaptation and its place in forming poetic images of poetic creation and transmission. I repeat some of Melchiori's analyses, and add further observations to elucidate the clusters of adaptations of Spenser which feed into Yeats's uses of the swan, and to indicate that in poems where this image recurs, Yeats also turned to Spenser for other images.

Melchiori suggests that the reference to Leda as "the paragon of whiteness" in "His Phoenix" may ultimately derive from Spenser's *Prothalamion* and that the paired swans of "The Wild Swans at Coole" may also "carry some recollection" of those in that poem.²⁹ Spenser's swans are in this case distinguished by comparison beyond even a divine incarnation:

With that I saw two Swannes of goodly hewe,
Come softly swimming downe along the Lee;
Two fairer Birds I yet did never see:
The snow which doth the top of *Pindus* strew,
Did never whiter shew,
Nor *Jove* himselfe when he a Swan would be
For love of *Leda*, whiter did appeare:
Yet *Leda* was they say as white as he,
Yet not so white as these, nor nothing neare;
So purely white they were,
That even the gentle streame, the which them bare,
Seem'd foule to them, and bad his billowes spare
To wet their silken feathers, least they might
Soyle their faire plumes with water not so fayre,
And marre their beauties bright,
That shone as heavens light³⁰

Yeats seems to have taken up the whiteness of Leda here, rather than that of the bird, and adapted it to produce a sense of legendary excess in imagery:

There is a queen in China, or maybe it's in Spain,
And birthdays and holidays such praises can be heard
Of her unblemished lineaments, a whiteness with no stain,
That she might be that sprightly girl trodden by a bird³¹

²⁸ Giorgio Melchiori, *The Whole Mystery of Art: Pattern into Poetry in the Work of W. B. Yeats* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), pp.72-163.

²⁹ Melchiori, pp.87, 99-132.

³⁰ *Prothalamion*, stanza 3, ll.37-52, pp.763-4, *SPES* p.763-4.

³¹ *VPoems* p.353.

So Yeats's first poetic use of Leda may be a Spenserian adaptation. From these and further examples, it is evident that Yeats followed Spenser in using swans as images of solitude, of companionship, of divine power and of the creation of emblems, but also adapted Spenser's images into increasingly specialised and stylised presentations of subjectivity, loneliness and fragility in extremity. As Melchiori notes, Yeats explicated this strain of bird imagery in a note to "Calvary".³²

Yeats himself casually allowed the confusion of possible sources when introducing the swan in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen". The prevarication is at once a hint towards the anima mundi, a studiedly imprecise reference and perhaps an ambivalent comment on Spenser:

Some moralist or mythological poet
 Compares the solitary soul to a swan;
 I am satisfied with that,
 Satisfied if a troubled mirror show it,
 Before that brief gleam of its life be gone,
 An image of its state;
 The wings half spread for flight,
 The breast thrust out in pride
 Whether to play, or to ride
 Those winds that clamour of approaching night.
 * * * * *

The swan has leapt into the desolate heaven:
 That image can bring wildness, bring a rage
 To end all things, to end
 What my laborious life imagined, even
 The half-imagined, the half-written page (pp.430-1)

In this and in succeeding uses of the swan, Yeats employs the motif as a combination of reception and creation occurring in extremity, in a mood which finds extreme beauty in the anticipation of conclusion.

Melchiori demonstrates a possible link to Shelley's *Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude*, and the more crucial one with *The Ruines of Time* (ll.589-602):

Upon that famous Rivers further shore,
 There stood a snowie Swan of heavenly hiew,
 And gentle kinde, as ever Fowle afore;
 A fairer one in all the goodlie crew
 Of white *Strimonian* brood might no man view:

³² Melchiori, p.102-4. *VPlays*, pp.789-791: "such lonely birds as the heron, hawk, eagle, and swan, are the natural symbols of subjectivity," (p.189); "a loneliness, opposite in kind, that unlike His [Christ's] can be, whether joyful or sorrowful, sufficient to itself." (p.790).

There he most sweetly sung the prophecie
Of his owne death in dolefull Elegie.

At last, when all his mourning melodie
He ended had, that both the shores resounded,
Feeling the fit that him forewarnd to die,
With loftie flight above the earth he bounded,
And out of sight to highest heaven mounted:
Where now he is become an heavenly signe;
There now the joy is his, here sorrow mine.³³

Melchiori notes that while the leap into heaven in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” and a similar image in *The Player Queen* derive from *The Ruines of Time*, the verbal picture of the swan does not. Instead, he points to a different passage in Spenser, among the emblems in the House of Busyrane, and further indicates that this pictorial description is also a source for “Leda and the Swan”:

Then was he turned into a snowy Swan,
To win fair *Leda* to his louely trade:
O wondrous skill, and sweet wit of the man,
That her in daffadillies sleeping made,
From scorching heat her daintie limbes to shade:
Whiles the proud Bird ruffing his fethers wyde,
And brushing his faire breast, did her inuade;
She slept, yet twixt her eyelids closely spyde,
How towards her he rusht, and smiled at his pryde.³⁴

Paul de Man relates the swan in “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” (and presumably in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”) to “that passage in the *Phaedo* where Plato likens the human soul to a swan.”³⁵ There Socrates describes two interpretations of the swan’s last song, one joyful and one sorrowful, but decides upon the former: the swan prophesies it’s joy in immortality.³⁶ An older authority comprehending a crucial dispute lies behind Shelley and Spenser here. The accumulation of sources is more significant than one single origin to Yeats’s uses of the swan at crucial points where he tests the production and persistence of poetic creations in the face of loss, decay and change.

³³ *The Ruines of Time* ll.589-602, *SPES* p.257-8.

³⁴ *FQ*, III, xi, 32, p.407; Melchiori, p.112. Melchiori also suggests that yet another passage from *FQ* (III.vi.st.7, p.356), describing the rape of Chrysogone by fire from heaven, also fed into Yeats’s synthesis of sources in “Leda and the Swan”, p.146.

³⁵ Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p.136.

³⁶ Plato *Phaedo*, trans with notes by David Gallop (Oxford: OUP, 1975, reprinted with corrections 1983), pp.34-5.

Another occurrence demonstrates a similar synthesis of different passages of Spenser, with an accumulation of poetic inheritances behind it. The scattered echoes here also give some indication of the verbal resonances which accompany Yeats's adaptations. As Melchiori shows, the source in *The Ruines of Time* is confirmed by the further echoes when Yeats returns to the image in "Coole and Ballylee, 1931:

Upon the border of that lake's a wood
Now all dry sticks under a wintry sun,
And in a copse of beeches there I stood,
For Nature's pulled her tragic buskin on
And all the rant's a mirror of my mood:
At sudden thunder of the mounting swan
I turned about and looked where branches break
The glittering reaches of the flooded lake.

Another emblem there! That stormy white
But seems a concentration of the sky;
And, like the soul, it sails into the sight
And in the morning's gone, no man knows why;
And is so lovely that it sets to right
What knowledge or its lack had set awry,
So arrogantly pure, a child might think
It can be murdered with a spot of ink. (pp.490-1)

In both of these adaptations Yeats is performing a poetic test of the adequacy of imagery, and of the challenge of writing it. The source in *The Ruines of Time* is an elegiac emblem, and Yeats draws on it in creative extremity, almost in an admission that a further emblem can always be drawn from extremity, as Nature's performance produces a supranatural sign. I will add that these examples also indicate something of the operation of Yeats's verbal memory: as well as using the image and certain words directly related to it, Yeats takes up other words and reorders them, apparently revising a whole descriptive structure. For instance, Yeats appears to transform "might no man view:" and seven lines later "And out of sight to highest heaven mounted:" into "it sails into the sight / And in the morning's gone, no man knows why". Perceptions and the ends of perception are reordered through the reconstitution of words into images.

However, Yeats's adaptations of Spenser in this poem do not stop with those noted by Melchiori. Yeats's own version of the flight into signification is itself further adapted at the conclusion of "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" in the

juxtaposition of the image of Pegasus, and another leap into heaven, with the swan. In Spenser, the two images of Sidney's death and apotheosis are fifty lines apart. Yeats brings them closer, and puts the imagery of flight under greater stress. In *The Ruines of Time*, the loss of Sidney is redescribed as a flight observed by the poet:

Still as I gazed, I beheld where stood
 A knight all arm'd, upon a winged steed,
 The same that was bred of *Medusaes* blood,
 On which *Dan Perseus* borne of heavenly seed,
 The faire *Andromeda* from peril freed:
 Full mortally this Knight ywounded was,
 That streames of blood foorth flowed on the gras.

Yet was he deckt (small joy to him alas)
 With manie garlands for his victories,
 And with rich spoyles, which late he did purchas
 Through brave atcheivements from his enemies:
 Fainting at last through long infirmities,
 He smote his steed, that straight to heaven him bore,
 And left me here his losse for to deplore.³⁷

In Yeats's adaptation, Pegasus has no poet to direct his flight from the saddle, and the swan now remains flightless:

But all is changed, that high horse riderless,
 Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode
 Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood. (p.492)

Given that Yeats's adaptations tend to employ several of the words and phrases which clustered around an image in his source, I believe that he was compressing two further motifs which were only juxtaposed in Spenser, and that the source for the Homer/Pegasus superimposition is another passage earlier in *The Ruines of Time*:

But fame with golden wings aloft doth flie,
 Above the reach of ruinous decay,
 And with brave plumes doth beate the azure skie,
 Admir'd of base-borne men from farre away:
 Then who so will with vertuous deeds assay
 To mount to heaven, on Pegasus must ride,
 And with sweete Poets verse be glorifide.

For not to have been dipt in Lethe lake,
 Could save the sonne of Thetis from to die;
 But that blinde bard did him immortall make
 With verses, dipt in deaw of Castalie³⁸

³⁷ *The Ruines of Time*, ll.645-658, SPES p.260.

³⁸ *The Ruines of Time*, ll.421-431, SPES p.250.

Spenser does not place Homer on Pegasus's back, but the proximity of the original poet to the elevation by poetry seems to have led Yeats to combine them and to present the combination in elegiac terms. Yeats juxtaposes and combines his sources and adapted emblems, but in that he is also adapting Spenser, whose account in *The Ruines of Time* of mortality and of the immortality granted by poetic fame proceeds through successive stages, culminating in the accumulation of emblems. *The Ruines of Time* tests modes of persistence in a catalogue of loss delivered by the spirit of the ruined Verulamium: the visionary's own images with their vacillation between loss and immortality succeed an extensive narrative of physical ruin. Yeats's attraction to the poem while extending his own mythologising of Coole seems to have derived from this preoccupation with symbolic ruins, from the fraught concern with the relation of poetry to mortality, but also from the place of Sidney in Spenser's poem: Yeats had already linked his writing on the Gregorys with Spenser's on Sidney. The mutability which is contrasted with the possibilities of poetic or heavenly is emphasised by the flowing river in Spenser's poem; in Yeats's it returns as a connective guarantor of a mode of permanence, but also a "darkening flood." Lethe lake, and its failure to guarantee invulnerability, may also have mixed into Yeats's lake. The ruin of Spenser's own house may also have predisposed Yeats to look to Spenser as an origin for Anglo-Irish ruins. Yeats's adaptations of selected images alternate between stressing, and ensuring, the persistence of poetic images and their brevity and fragility amid overwhelming loss and decay, but he finally refuses the confidence in a flight into permanent symbolism. Ruins have a particular relevance to poetic adaptation: ruins are structures which were constructed to offer one meaning to an observer, but have come to offer another. As well as evoking transience and decay, they are types of adaptation.

Yeats draws upon Homer and Spenser and his own previous adaptations of the swan image, with an inclusive synthesis which places these poets and Platonic doctrines into a transhistorical anima mundi. However, Yeats is also measuring up to mortality. He then adapts Spenser's use of Homer as a guarantor of poetic immortality, probably in combination with the image of Sidney as contrasting immortality and mortality, to bring the accumulation of poetic practices into history and to an end:

We were the last romantics - chose for theme
Traditional sanctity and loveliness;
Whatever's written in what poets name
The book of the people; whatever most can bless
The mind of man or elevate a rhyme (pp.491-2)

De Man's analysis of the accumulation of poetic tradition demonstrates the extraordinary reach of Yeats's poetic histories:

The swan drifting on a "darkening flood" refers to a soul still imprisoned in generated matter (water) (unlike the "mounting swan" in line 14), and Yeats is suggesting that ever since men have been willing to found their values upon the incarnate world and to praise the act of generation, Pegasus has been riderless - there has been no truly great heroic poetry. This came about with Homer, a transitional figure who, in his esoteric aspects (as in "The Cave of the Nymphs") still belongs to an uncorrupted past, but in his exoteric aspects stands at the dawn of a literature which will get increasingly enmeshed in the servitudes of original sin.³⁹

De Man correctly links Yeats's use of Homer here with that in "The Autumn of the Body", in which Homer represents the beginning of poetry's increasing "preoccupation with things".⁴⁰

Homer is in fact the real "last romantic," the last representative of a tradition that nearly died with him, and Yeats affects to see himself in a somewhat similar situation, as one of the few to have kept contact with "traditional sanctity." In a sense, the "we" in "We were the last romantics..." refers to Homer and Yeats, whereas the statement that follows "but all is changed..." (l.46) points not so much to the present, the 1931 of the poem, as to the entire time span of Hellenic and Christian civilization.[...] A poetic rebirth can only be expected in an altogether new type of civilization. We have moved a long way beyond Lady Gregory...⁴¹

However, the act of synthesis involved in this implied literary history is sited at Coole and insistently present, and it relies on a capacity to dismiss history as much as on the application of modes of it. Whether a preoccupation with things, with the natural world or with original sin, the fall may be an origin, or it may be perpetually about to happen: Yeats's accumulations of literary models depict various crises, but the crises generate modes of presenting poetics, the poetics are not subordinate to stable or consistent views of history. Yeats's broader cycles do not dominate his individual poems, since his histories do not aim for consistency: like his sources they may be adapted to each poem in a perpetually threatened link

³⁹ de Man, p.142.

⁴⁰ *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p.301; *Essays and Introductions*, p.192..

between temporal and eternal regions. In adapting Spenser Yeats draws again on his association of the Gregorys with Sidney, but actually synthesises poet with immortalised subject and leaves the resulting elegiac subject caught between the loss of access to eternity and a complex of poetic instances which have implicitly escaped temporal restriction through poetic success. Ultimately the Yeatsian poetic tradition is an accumulation of syntheses reached in tension with oppositional phases, and it stands against any other recognition of history. Its construction is measured against the present moments in which the poet chooses to form further syntheses, and which are recognised only by the formation of those syntheses. Tradition itself becomes a mode of adaptation which proceeds by co-opting and dominating historical instants.

Patrick Keane identifies Spenserian echoes in “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” which offer another Yeatsian confrontation between mortality and persistence:

Soul deplores the descent from the eternal sphere into the cone or gyre of “fallen” human life and austere commands total concentration on reversing that descent and escaping from the gyre. The obvious “variation” is that mutinous Self, rejecting the imperious summons to “the steep ascent,” sets up opposing gyre-symbols, the sword and silk-wound sheath “emblematical of love and war,” and chooses rebirth rather than escape from the cycle of Mutability. (Whereas Spenser would, in the contemptus mundi tradition, finally “*cast away*” the love of *things so vaine.../ Whose flowering pride, so fading* and so fickle / Short Time shall soon cut down with his consuming sickle,” doctrine-altering Self chooses another keen, curved weapon: Sato’s sword, “unspotted by the centuries,” bound in embroidery that is both “flowering” and faded yet protective and beautiful. What Self will finally “cast out” is not the love of “things” but “remorse,” issuing in a final *affirmation* of “*everything*.”) [Italics Keane’s]⁴² (“A Dialogue of Self and Soul”, pp.477-9)

The relevant passage in Spenser follows Nature’s judgment of Mutability’s case (*FQ* VII.vii. st.1, p.735):

When I bethinke me on that speech whyleare,
Of *Mutability*, and well it way:
Me seemes, that though she all unworthy were
Of the Heav’ns Rule; yet very sooth to say,
In all things else she beares the greatest sway.

⁴¹ de Man, pp.142-3.

⁴² Patrick J Keane, *Yeats’s Interactions with Tradition* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987), p.143.

Which makes me loath this state of life so tickle,
And loue of things so vaine to cast away;
Whoes flowering pride, so fading and so fickle,
Short *Time* shall soon cut down with his consuming sickle.

Again, Yeats's adaptation takes the form of a transfer of terms in order to refashion the poetic stance towards mortality and immortality. Yeats turns to Spenser for Neoplatonic symbolism but adapts it to construct Self's refutation of Soul.

Spenser's most significant and most obvious return in Yeats's late poetry is in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited". The ease with which Yeats invokes Spenser as a model for the guarantor of permanent value here might suggest that as well as simplifying his friends when they were dead, Yeats had here stripped his poetic predecessor down to an uncomplicated source for images. However, the "medieval" courtesy, the disappointed hope in the persistence of an aristocratic support, perhaps his association of Spenser with a procession of pictures, and the Spenserian preoccupation with the mortality and immortality of fame all feed into that choice of Spenser's image.

My mediaeval knees lack health until they bend,
But in that woman, in that household where
Honour had lived so long, all lacking found.
Childless I thought 'my children may find here
Deep-rooted things,' but never foresaw its end,
And now that end has come I have not wept;
No fox can foul the lair the badger swept.

(An image out of Spenser and the common tongue)
John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought
All that we did, all that we said or sang
Must come from contact with the soil, from that
Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.
We three alone in modern times had brought
Everything down to that sole test again,
Dream of the noble and the beggarman. (p.603)

Richard Finneran, commenting on his editing of the poem, states that Yeats "may well have been planning a major revision of the stanza, one in which he could have restored the fifth stanza to the *ottava rima* form of the rest of the poem."⁴³ However, in the absence of any such restitution, the stanza dramatizes a curtailment in a seven-line stanza (perhaps recalling that of Spenser's poem, though in an ABABACC rather than ABABBCC rhyme) but then continues with

⁴³ *Editing Yeats's Poems: a Reconsideration* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p.73.

an assertion of continuity of poetic language, between Spenser and the common tongue, which leads into a continuity across time between Spenser and Yeats and friends. Wayne Chapman shows that Yeats drew on Spenser for the Antaeus image which follows the attribution of the previous image.⁴⁴ In this poem Yeats manages to employ Spenser with both of his major Yeatsian connotations: Spenser is both elegist of a passing artistic and aristocratic phase, and part of the continuing *anima mundi*. The linking of literary and popular speech is of course a recurrent theme for Yeats, but the use of this image almost as a manifesto perhaps recalls the conclusion of “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” particularly strongly. As Bornstein notes, though, Yeats actually changes Spenser’s application of the image, and I suggest that this adaptation accords with a pattern in Yeats’s rearrangements of Spenserian elegiac images. Spenser’s lines accepted inadequate substitution as a fact:⁴⁵

He now is gone, the whiles the fox is crept
Into the hole, the which the badger swept.⁴⁶

The early impression which the passage made upon Yeats is evident in the Spenser edition, where he quotes these lines in the introduction as well as including the stanzas which conclude with these lines in the “Courtiers and Great Men” section. Yeats also used the image in a different adaptation in *Deirdre*.⁴⁷ In “The Municipal Gallery Revisited” the assertion of the immunity of Yeats’s personal Golden Age from what succeeds it is performed through alteration of the poetic source. Yeats appeals to Spenser as arbiter of traditional ideals, but this poetic model is accorded no parallel immunity from change. Now “No fox” can disturb the past or its present glorification. Yeats certainly returns to Spenser to bring guarantees of “traditional” value into play, but the relations between poetic and other traditions are not simple or stable, and may be significant indicators of progressions in Yeats’s aesthetics. This adaptation, though, seems to accord well with Yeats’s treatment of Spenser in the introduction, in that although Yeats draws on Spenser for images of a threatened or concluding tradition, he ultimately rejects what he sees as Spenser’s

⁴⁴ Chapman, p.213, *FQ* II.xi.st.45-6.

⁴⁵ Bornstein p.28-9.

⁴⁶ ll.223-4, *SPES* p.242.

⁴⁷ *VPlays*, p.355, *Deirdre* (1907): Fergus adapts the image to the contrast between Conchubar and Naoise:

It is but natural
That she should doubt him, for her house has been
The hole of the badger and the den of the fox.

passivity and subservience in favour of a more aggressive aesthetic pride. For all his ambivalence about the isolating and isolated qualities of other aspects of Spenser, he adapts Spenser to assert immunity from time and change. Spenser is implicitly placed into yet another ending tradition, this time one ending with Yeats and his friends, but fame persists unchanged as Spenser feared it might not.

Spenser's influence is suggested at other points in Yeats's mature poetry, although these are difficult to substantiate beyond doubt. McAlindon noted that

The special combination of social and moral virtue which Yeats associates in his mature poetry with the female aristocratic type - "pride established in humility," "all that pride and that humility" ["Coole Park, 1929", "The Municipal Gallery Revisited"] - is to be found in the bride of "Epithalamion": Behold how goodly my faire loue does ly / In proud humility" (ll.305-306).⁴⁸

Given the significance of *The Teares of the Muses* for Yeats, I am also inclined to suggest that he drew on that poem in "Under Ben Bulbin" when demanding a resistance to the poetic decline manifested by those "Base-born products of base beds." The term "base-born" may be a generic aristocratic assault on types of illegitimacy, but it occurs twice in Spenser's poem, the second time in Erato's criticism of the "base-borne brood" of poets who have defiled love poetry.⁴⁹ Although any identification of a borrowing which rests on a single term must be tenuous, I defend this on the grounds that Yeats is also concerned here with linking physical and poetic inheritance. The tonal adaptation is extreme.

Though perhaps never Yeats's single principal influence, even in the earliest work, Spenser continued to offer opportunities for re-structuring poetic, historical, social and personal traditions, and for extending complex manipulations of the relations between poetry and time. In Yeats's poetry after *Poems of Spenser*, borrowings from Spenser tend to be associated with an elegiac register of loss, with persistent values and with historical change. This has clear parallels with the Spenser introduction not perhaps so much that the later borrowings represent exactly what Yeats praises in Spenser in the introduction, but because the same kind of preoccupations, rearrangements and associations operate in both, and examination of Yeats's influences requires close attention to his processes of

⁴⁸ McAlindon, p.163; *SPES* p.674.

⁴⁹ *SPES* l.392, p.284.

ociation. The example of Spenser is revealing, because it is possible to see
ats's literary histories issuing in modes of adaptation.

Conclusion

In examining *Ideas of Good and Evil*, *Poems of Spenser* and Yeats's later adaptations of Spenser I have tried to comprehend the uses of an idiosyncratic critical practice which is also a mode of literary history and which feeds into the processes of poetic adaptation. I have concentrated mainly on a relatively brief period of Yeats's career in order to achieve coherence: I have examined this critical practice within a few years, rather than across the whole career, because I find its emergence in this period creates some major terms, tropes and techniques which run through his later writings. However, it is clear that this kind of coherence can only be relative: as I have suggested, Yeats's literary career can seem to have been almost perpetual development, and a coherent study of any part of it must take note of shifts, even within one essay. The relations between aesthetic creation and concepts of time in these literary histories encode the possibility for adaptation and recurrent development within aesthetic programs through dissatisfaction and an impulse towards further revelation in the face of recurrent change. Within this period, as I have shown, Yeats's critical writings make use of combination, competition, alternation and transition of and between theoretical positions on the relations between history and literature, and this is why I have endeavoured to find in these writings a practice working through "emphatic prose" rather than a set of flexible principles. I will summarise some of the major aspects and implications of Yeats's literary history in this period, and then relate those to the uses of system in the career as a whole.

Combining ideas of time in history and of time in aesthetic experience, Yeats returned compulsively to the evasion of temporal restriction which he attributed in varying degrees to imaginative creations. He placed imaginative creations into an order in terms of their reapplication of symbols, but he also applied his terms with insistent literalness, connecting the time-experience of reading, or even more, hearing, an imaginative work with an access to eternity. In terms of his own poetic career, his critical assertion that poets perceive true history is a justification of his own use of the perception of proliferating phases to generate poems. As I have suggested, it certainly had a part in his poetic adaptations: adaptations are new perceptions of phases even as they are new aesthetic acts and new aesthetic time-experiences.

These uses of literary history are significant in the development of Yeats's career because they are often experimental formulations about the purpose of poetry, its relation to the past and its relation to audiences. When examining Yeats's literary histories it is easy to miss some of the implications of the principle that symbols are what persists through and between communities: little or nothing is permitted lasting value, or indeed to last at all. Even interpretations of symbols are allowed to be in continual flux. Scepticism and relativism are perhaps the qualities which are always associated with Yeats, but the aesthetic formulations in *Ideas of Good and Evil* are in their own ways sceptical and relativist even as they select examples of escape from decay or temporality. Poetic perception of flux is allowed to become a partial escape from time. The despotism of time remains, but by ritualising time into aesthetic experience, perceiving imaginative movements within it, predicting, making use of his own learning experiences, and reflecting, Yeats came to terms with it in poetry and in criticism.

As I have shown, Yeats's formulations tend to work within structures of mutual reliance: literary history enables and justifies selection and adaptation, enabling adaptations accumulate into versions of literary history. Imaginative works are assessed in terms of ideal audience-communities, communities are defined by their imaginative possessions. The elements of systematic thought in these literary histories attach value to imaginative works and to events, but the perspectives and substance of these valuations take on terms and structures adapted from imaginative works. In Yeats's formulations, the significant history of the imagination in races and places determines the conditions of literary production, but it is also manifested by literary production and presented through mythic and dramatic structures. Teleologies in Yeats's phases are related to and analogous to those of artistic structures. The repetition of their patterns becomes a kind of repeated performance. Movements which flower before they die play out tragic themes with theatrical plots. The writings which I have considered expound versions of history composed of the significant history transmitted in literature, of notions of potential literary history, and of the reasons why potential failed to be realised by an era or an individual. All other historical details or patterns are considered in these terms.

The advantages and the weaknesses of the mutual reliance of Yeats's principles lie in self-enclosure. In a sense, Yeats's literary histories avoid some of the problems of the genre, since they are truly literary histories: on their terms only pictures which comprehend imaginative creation can be the matter of significant history, and even those aspects of contextual history which are inimical to literature can only be considered as patterns in the changes of imaginative communities. These literary histories have very definite purposes when they imply that certain kinds of literary production should or will be produced in the near future, and particularly in Ireland. In these cases, Yeats's association of poetry with prophecy is placed under some strain: his assumption of the authority of a prophetic or priestly role may declare a hope for the acceptance of his terms and claims, for his projected ideal audiences becoming real or indeed being already real, but they also place a structural and argumentative reliance on division and heterodoxy. The awareness of the potential gap between ideal and real communities led Yeats to revert to a more limited ideal imaginative community.

Yeats's application of histories of imaginative change to the development of social classes in society is presented through contrast between kinds of imaginative time, forms of perpetual chronotope. The middle classes are caught in aimless movement in time, the peasantry are unchanged by time and have timeless imaginative possessions, while the aristocracy produce occasional new equivalencies between life and art, and themselves become new achievements of symbolism. Yeats is not alone in defining a period of English cultural history in terms of the growth of the middle class, nor in making this a perpetual motif in various periods of English history: literary histories of England often fall into this pattern, explaining many changes in literary production and reception at least since Chaucer as functions of this kind of growth, even if they rarely reach Yeats's normative conclusions. As I have noted, chronotopes of Ireland designed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also persist. Yeats's literary histories remain exceptional, though, in their sophisticated associations between social and imaginative conditions, and kinds of time.

Many of Yeats's shifts between positions are tactical, and are produced in response to arguments about the aims and means of cultural nationalism. As I have suggested, Yeats produced many of these formulations in order to suggest

principles and cultural patterns, and to establish the permanent authority of these principles and patterns while also suggesting their peculiar relevance to contemporary conditions: the present is not only set into a particular mode of social context, it may also be the moment before revelation. In *Ideas of Good and Evil* he often dramatises his own autobiographical shifts between ideals, and his acceptance of broader systems of shifts in history and literary history is to some degree a recognition of the advantages of a system of shifts and oppositions in identifying some of his own alternations: authority is built from personal experience changing perceptions of art, and this experiential aspect also aims to draw in readers and to suggest that the synthetic arrangement of subjects could move beyond the personal to represent shared belief. The tactical contrasts and shifts as well as the syntheses touch on many areas of experience. *Ideas of Good and Evil* may be Yeats's most religious criticism, its heterodox syntheses recurrently questioning religious status and taking on religious language. As these reinterpretational qualities through terms of development applicable in some way to all races and nations, they also suggest the existence of a pan-national imaginative spirituality. However, heterodoxy comes to be necessary, oppositional and evasive in turns, and since division is traced back to original social fractures and losses, these point to necessary, if not fortunate, falls. The ideal of community presented through these religious terms is also problematic because it is clearly at variance with existing religious communities. Techniques which allow a negotiation of restrictive nationalism may ultimately make this literary history and criticism a victim of its own reasoning. Yeats reinterprets so much that it is difficult to say where the centre is for his ideal audience, in terms of place, or of belief. This criticism cites London as a cultural and imaginative disaster, but cannot rely on a nameless Galway either because of the difficulty of relating that to new national cultural developments and sophisticated artistic modes. Stratford becomes an example of the re-establishment of imaginative conditions, but Yeats actually shies away from giving any similar Irish example as anything more than a potential and an aim to be achieved in phenomenal performances of poetry and drama, rather than in a whole society in a place. In *Ideas of Good and Evil*, Dublin is the place of some of Yeats's youthful ideals, but its status in the present is less certain. Yeats's rearrangements of ideals always threaten to leave a national community behind

m. Ireland is either in a past condition, in places, or is present imaginative ential, perhaps antithetical to reality. In the more apocalyptic formulations, ats anticipates a reversal of the antithetical relationship between imagination and ver in a new phase, but as I have shown this proved unsustainable. In later tings Yeats continued to theorise an antithetical relation between imaginative l political development. In one complex his interpretations of the fall and death Parnell as the end of one movement in political nationalism and the beginning of e in cultural nationalism distort the facts to preserve such an antithetical relation. Yeats's suggestions of system in cultural history offer holds on intransigent ility, but only as compensations for the failure of all national energies and tential communities to be realised together.

As his writings around the run of the century show Yeats learning to make e of opposition and division, they fail to convince when idealising unities, wever productive many of their syntheses are. They frequently gloss over some visions: heterodox synthesis treads carefully around Catholicism in places, but me of the most effective formulations rely on opposition, and gain impetus from But evasion has its limitations, and the political, social and national realities rich Yeats reinterpreted and synthesised remained obstinately real outside his iticism. His formulations remained imaginative exercises, correcting reality and scovering potential but only intermittently accepting that they were primarily ily concerned with generating aesthetic acts rather than with predicting extra- rary developments. Yeats paid the price for persistently adapting tropes for the scription of cultural community and imagination in history, the price being that s extreme adaptations were not accepted. His grander ideals for audiences were rhaps necessarily failures, and in accepting this he is often in danger of simply eing left commenting disdainfully on what is the case. He retained images of ocalypse and escape from time, but limited them to qualities of personality and ccessive achievements in single poets and poems rather than general change. The evelopment of the tropes which I have considered is already apparent within this eriod, and it continued as a development towards the internalisation of elements

Roy Foster examines Yeats's and other revivalists' reinterpretations of cultural movements, interpretations which tend to give credit to themselves for initiating recovery and the creation of ew directions for Irish energies. *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (London: Penguin, 1993), pp.262-3.

system, interspersed with successive attempts to project them out onto the world.

Isolation and awareness of isolation also produced developments in Yeats's sense of significant history, developments towards the emergence of histories of significant figures rather than the concentration on what Joep Leerssen describes as revivalist "double focus on past and peasant", the judgment by a standard of a mythic and mythopoeic original state.² In *Ideas of Good and Evil* many of the biographies of poets, such as they are, are reductive and limiting. Even citations of myth do not concentrate much on mythic heroism. As I have suggested, the movement towards the presentation of significant figures is already evident in Yeats's selections from Spenser. Though Yeats would make ever more sophisticated formulations about poets, heroines and heroes out of place in ages, in the period after 1902 he began to permit them more tragic stature. Loss becomes the focus in elegies for individuals or milieux rather than for an original imaginative state. Place remains important, but becomes increasingly localised, Coole rather than Ireland or even Galway. Of course, this treatment of significant figures also tends to be modified by system in yet later developments, but during and after the period on which I have concentrated, the peasant is replaced by expressive personalities. In terms of Yeats's choices of tradition this gave rise to an increasing interest in Ben Jonson. The broader notion of imagination as compensation for lack of power issues in a new concern with created personal masks.

Yeats's cultural arguments always concentrate on certain aspects of presentation, stressing the aesthetic elements of some ideals, and considering these types of past, present and future in terms of the relations between imagination and time, or stillness in time. The oddly literal way in which he combines aesthetics and histories, and presents the golden age and ideal future conditions as equivalent to art, can fall back into an acceptance that these conditions are only realisable in aesthetic experience and that his literary histories only have applications for literature. The model of the original state, the lost ideal, has its own contradictions, contradictions which are borne out by Yeats's vacillations between concentrating on the individual and on the era. In his ideal original state,

Joep Leerssen *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), p.221.

sonal expression was untrammelled, individualism unknown: the distinction can be unconvincing. In looking to myth and folklore for confirmation of an original community of moods, he prizes imaginative productions coming from no one single dated and historically placed source: the authors are in effect in eternity, as they are not in history. Literary history is both fallen and effective because it is the history of individuals. In the great memory particular influences or productions are dissolved in a general imaginative procession: symbols and truths come with no particular father. His literary histories adapt the notion of the great memory by siting and locating its operations within history. In spite of the citations of contemporary works by Gregory and Bridges as examples of the renewed access to the great memory, Yeats's literary history in this period clearly learns to make careful use of the problematic history within which literature can be placed.

My stress on the inconsistency between specific elements of pattern in Yeats's literary histories claims the justification of a perception of a greater consistency, in that the manifestations of phasal history in his writings continued to change and to rely on change through the phases of his own career. These phasal histories register Yeats's adaptations of notions of communities and of his place within them. Inconsistency is necessary to the production of further cycles in the imaginative rearrangement of the poetic career.

I have emphasised the importance of eternity in Yeats's critical formulations. In various terms, many editors and anthologists have divided work between what is caught in a period, and what persists in giving aesthetic appreciation beyond it, whether through a notion of transcendence, or of the permanence of some values, or in terms of "relevance". Yeats is exceptional in treating eternity so literally, and attributing to it a set of aesthetic qualities. Some of the more peculiar aspects of Yeats's criticism derive from a set of assumptions which attempt to avoid being solely of their time, but that may only be because they have never been shared. *Ideas of Good and Evil* is experimental in that respect, but even that volume anticipates the limitation of the revelation of the eternal into a fugitive, rare individual capacity.

The Spenser essay formulates conflicts between what was "natural" to Spenser, and what was the effect of his era. In this sense, it anticipates the classifications of *A Vision*, but it makes much more use of potential, and is more

viously directed towards a process of literary judgment and selection. I will briefly compare Yeats's modes of literary history around the turn of the century with his later system, to note these differences in purpose as well as the similarities. Richard Davidson considers Yeats's essays on Spenser and on Shelley, which were written within a short period, in terms of their consideration of the potential which each poet had to achieve "unity of being" in times of transition, and makes some suggestive analyses of Phases 3 and 17 of *A Vision* as a later contrast of these two models.³ While accepting this stress on Yeats's suggestion that both Spenser and Shelley lived in ages of transition, I would extend this point to note how very many eras of transition Yeats imagines in his other writing of that period. In this Yeats follows Pater, whose artists and connoisseurs are similarly described as living and working among cultural shifts and movements rather than stable milieux: they become test cases, absorbing the influences of different and competing movements and beliefs, and providing the occasions for elaborating on modes of history and historical themes. Many of Pater's central figures are, perhaps to a surprising extent, symptomatic rather than expressive. Yeats tends to alternate between symptomatic and more expressive definitions. For Yeats and for Pater, the consideration of historical context is always on the curve of a growth or a decay admitted definition and the selective arrangement of the figure in question into a new construct. The figure is presented as the product of, or as the arena for, conflicting forces. This kind of historical imagining also allowed both writers to consider and to guarantee that their own eras were equally subject to various modes of change, to anticipate change in literary terms and to prepare to perceive it as an aesthetic experience.

Yeats presents predecessors as perpetually confronted by and defined against, the movement of several developing traditions. In these formulations, he is able to perceive a potential literary history, the contribution which could have been made by a predecessor if the movements of their time had not silenced or restrained them, or simply taken them in another direction. In its most extreme forms this potential is imagined as the revitalisation of ancient and perpetuating traditions of

Richard B Davidson, *Yeats's Images of Spenser*, unpublished PhD dissertation (University of Colorado, 1973): p.93. Yeats's Spenser introduction was completed in December 1902, the first part of the Shelley essay was first published in the *Dome*, June 1900, the second in *Ideas of Good and Evil* (May 1903).

abolism and in the cases of Blake and Shelley, notably, this is a particularly strong theme; in the Spenser essay the emphasis falls more on a failure to recognise a potential. One particular reservation which should be considered before accepting Yeats's later terms as appropriate here is that in the period on which I have concentrated. Having perhaps only recently discovered the possibilities of manipulating histories, Yeats did not effect the kind of poised interaction between history and personality which characterises his later systematic analyses. Personality has not yet gained its full expressive value. In *Ideas of Good and Evil* and in the Spenser introduction Blake, Shelley, Spenser and Shakespeare are considered as subject to competing historical forces, but their personalities are not dissected or defined through Yeats's later mode. In the Spenser introduction, Spenser's faults are partly attributed to the failures of his personality to stand up to historical conditions, but we should read this as the articulation of a negotiation with and selection from Spenser rather than evidence of an emergent complete system. Davidson is correct in noting that the Spenser introduction displays Yeats's first articulations of some of his later historical propositions, but his assertion that "becomes notes towards the formulation of *A Vision*" is flawed by excessive hindsight.⁴ This insistence on anticipating *A Vision* suggests that Yeats was somehow always in pursuit of a rigid system, whereas his diverse uses of literary and cultural history demonstrate that a lack of rigidity was often crucial, to an even greater extent than do the built-in complexities of *A Vision* itself, which recurrently modify its histories. Readings of Yeats's histories which ignore their partial, contingent and metaphorical nature descend rapidly into folly, and *A Vision* may best be read as a coalescence rather than a real culmination of long-standing modes of thought. Elements of hindsight are inevitable and useful, but in reading Yeats's earlier literary histories it is more productive to regard his movements towards systems as contingently productive and exemplary responses to particular needs rather than as gestures towards dogmatic schemes.

Critics who take Yeats's cyclical theories too literally should recognise the similarity in Yeats's uses of the impending end and the original crisis: it is the idea of a crisis which he returns to, not the consistent arrangement of complete histories. Clearly, Yeats found powerful aesthetic possibilities in poetic creation and in the

Davidson, p.93.

iculation of poetics which are placed in particular kinds of time. His literary and cultural histories provide metaphors for poetry by selecting the moments of culture, or before revelation, apocalypse or collapse, often regardless of his own actual temporal, cultural, physical or geographical distance from the specific moments whose connotations and images he adapts. The point within the historical development, the point on the curve which he delineates with a suggestion of pattern but without achieved pattern, is more significant than other aspects of that milieu or place. Obviously some of his milieux have more importance than others, and their evocation is more sustained, but many involve modes of history which are primarily dramatic and generative. Readings of Yeats's literary histories which attempt to rationalise them in terms of the pursuit of unity of being or unity of culture or unity of system will necessarily fail to register the uses which Yeats makes of a multiplicity of phases, and the conditions which he authoritatively but consistently attributes to each phase. Points on curves, anticipations and the beginnings of declines seem to offer Yeats criteria, impetus and the possibility of continuity: it is misleading to extrapolate from them in search of complete or consistent systems.

Yeats's modifications and proliferations of system have implications for all of his notions of tradition. He frequently suggests a conscious or unconscious access to other literary, mystical or occult traditions in the work of his predecessors, and justifies such claims by claiming that these traditions are manifested in the perpetuation of symbols and beliefs. Heterodoxy and the dependence to choose from traditions become perpetual principles in his poetics, and the possibility of perpetual recurrence of the matter of imaginative creation, manifested in the traditions which he detects in his predecessors, destabilises hierarchy and linear models of history. The persistence of imaginative creation and of reception become compensations for historical decay and defeat, but this comes to have ironic implications when combined with political nationalism and hopes for success. In the period which I have been concerned with, the notion of imagination as inverse to power also develops in the direction of individuality, towards formulations about an individual as opposed to a prevailing quality in an era. This too is a withdrawal from predictions of new unity. In spite of occasional dogmatic statements, Yeats does not rationalise the different modes of continuation

different traditions into an overarching, consistent system. He retains access to them, producing inconsistent but rich syntheses.

The delineation of inconsistent, multiple, superimposed cyclical analyses allowed Yeats to use organic metaphors to describe changes in poetic modes and forms, and to suggest both immanent patterns and a potential ultimate and organic imaginative unity, without being trapped by those concepts: they allow a combination of authority and freedom. Cycles offer repetition, and repetition with some alteration is itself a way of imagining adaptation of influence. When the cycle is perceived in past history, it allows any period to be analysed as being on a curve, several curves, always about to be something else or witnessing the fading out of movement. Rather as his own work can seem always to be in transition between positions, his versions of the past enact development and competition. Among his many constructions of past times and traditions, Byzantium is perhaps the exception because of its particular metaphorical connotations, but in a celebrated passage there are reservations even with Byzantium. Yeats's apparent care in choosing that place and period can be misleading: the appeal of the image of Byzantium may rely on an implicit contrast with the Rome which proceeded through Republic, Golden Age, decline and fall. It is probably true that at least in any Western European historical imaginations Byzantium seems characterised by prolonged decorative decadence rather than by the Roman cyclical pattern and imperialism. Within that prolonged, artificial suspension of historical imagination, Yeats selected a particular phase when art was permitted to thrive by a particularly favourable arrangement of phasal movements in culture. Yet even with Byzantium, Yeats imagined his ideal time with some finesse, but then held back from total endorsement of this death-like perfection of art in life by reservations about the condition of language.

I think that in early Byzantium, and maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, and that architect and artificers - *though not, it may be, poets, for language had been the instrument of controversy and must have grown abstract* - spoke to the multitude and the few alike. The painter and the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of Sacred Books were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of

individual design, absorbed in their subject matter and that the vision of a whole people.⁵ [My italics]

Even if unity of culture, unity of being and unity of system were Yeats's overriding preoccupations, and the very range of traditions on which he drew must question the consistency of his many assertions of the necessity for unity of culture, we must still acknowledge that lack of unity, failure of it, or progress towards it, provided Yeats with more in the form of metaphors for poetry and modes of negotiating literary history. In Yeats's literary histories, there lies the possibility that the unfallen state of the imaginative community is actually incompatible with creative individuality, and perhaps with writing as opposed to oral culture: his literary history is necessarily a matter of measuring divisions and restrictions since the undivided ideal, which is the origin and a perpetual potential, is not literary and not historical and concerns only unnamed authors in an original undifferentiated state.. Yeats's great memory is a pattern of potential mythopoeia, but in his later versions the symbols do not just become new myths, they recurrently re-establish myths of threatened myth and they despair of reconstituting the imaginative community which they memorialise. Yeats's early treatments of all literature as a resource of timeless symbolism may anticipate this by breaking down structures and myths into their elements ready for combination: he used the great memory to disestablish crucial sites of poetic tradition when necessary, in order to present them as elements in need of reconstitution.

I will conclude by looking at one example of Yeats's critical prose from the period following the first years of the century. *Discoveries: a Volume of Essays* (1907) certainly develops the essay style of *Ideas of Good and Evil*: it accumulates meditative passages with greater assurance. However, in comparison with the earlier volume, this assurance can also involve distance and a systemic stability of perspective, even if in a stable view of instability. This mode is both less tentative and less extreme in prediction: it lacks the same urgency and sense of discovery in theorising histories of the imagination and moves towards the established ritual system of *A Vision*. In "In the Serpent's Mouth" the symbol of the ouroboros, the serpent of eternity, which appears in Yeats's writings as a recurrent symbol of recurrence, now suggests a more complete acceptance of cycle. It marks a new

A Critical Edition of Yeats's A Vision (1925), ed. by George Mills Harper and Walter Kelly Hood

use of continual change, and is fused with a symbol of God, but that change is invoked to provide yet another model of literary influence and literary history:

If it be true that God is a circle whose centre is everywhere, the saint goes to the centre, the poet and artist to the ring where everything comes round again.

the better known version of the formulation, God is the circle whose centre is everywhere, its edge nowhere.⁶ Yeats alters this, and manages to make the ring the interesting place to be.

The poet must not seek for what is still and fixed, for that has no life for him; and if he did, his style would become cold and monotonous, and his sense of beauty faint and sickly, as are both style and beauty to my imagination in the prose and poetry of Newman, but be content to find his pleasure in all that is for ever passing away that it may come again, in the beauty of woman, in the fragile flowers of spring, in momentary heroic passion, in whatever is most fleeting, most impassioned, as it were, for its own perfection, most eager to return in its glory. Yet perhaps he must endure the impermanent a little, for these things return, but not wholly, for not two faces are alike, and, it may be, had we more learned eyes, no two flowers. Is it that all things are made by the struggle of the individual and the world, of the unchanging and the returning, and that the saint and the poet are over all, and that the poet has made his home in the serpent's mouth?⁷

In comparison with much of *Ideas of Good and Evil*, this is much less concerned with escape from time, and more with perception and creativity dependent on change. It seems also much less concerned with creating an imaginative community to accept its terms and to begin a new age. Its vision of change accepts individuality, and does not yearn to recover or share a great secret. It is also a step towards schematisation of relations explored in the earlier book. The element of prophecy which is retained is prophecy of further flux and uncertainty.

It is evident that in his later adaptations of Spenser, Yeats continued to be guided by notions of historical division, but I will note particularly that although in his critical pronouncements it is symbol which persists, in his own adaptations the rearrangement of particular words is crucial in acknowledging and reordering previous poems into new aesthetic complexes which are also new time-

London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1978), p.191.

“‘The nature of God is a circle of which the centre is everywhere and the circumference is nowhere.’ Anon. Said to have been traced to a lost treatise of Empedocles, quoted in the *Roman de a Rose*, and by S. Bonaventura in *Itinerarius Mentis in Deum*, cap.v *ad fin.*” *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* third edition (Oxford; O. U. P., 1979) p.7.

Essays and Introductions, pp.287-8. First published in *Discoveries: a Volume of Essays* (Dundrum: Dun Emer Press, 1907).

periences. Yeats's formulations about poetry and history insistently link time as technical and aesthetic, with time as era and phase. His adaptations are, considered in terms of the principles of his early critical writings, rearrangements of images into new rhythms which create new relationships to time. History remains a matter of relationship between poet and audience, a matter of assessing imaginative conditions. The literary response to this history which is always primarily literary after all the uses of system, a matter of the arrangement of words.

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